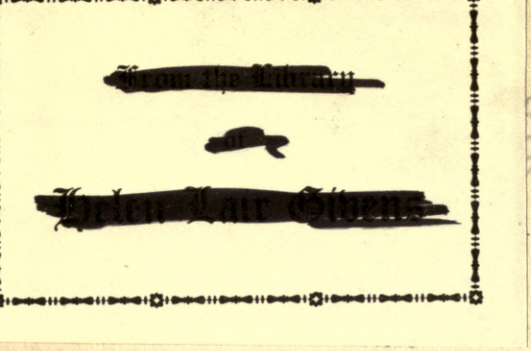
THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

CLARICE VALLETTE McCAULEY



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THE GARDEN
OF DREAMS

The Garden of Dreams

by

Clarice Vallette McCauley

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TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE EVER WANDERED
WITHIN THE LOVE-GIRT REACHES OF
THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

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THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

Prologue

PROLOGUE

WITH long, swinging steps the man skirted the little valley and, facing the rising sun took the road to the right that wound upward over the mountain. There marched, visualized before him, recollections of other times, when, bareheaded even as now, freckled-faced, and often, dirty, he had trotted happily along intent on the morning's business — the filling, perhaps, of his shiny pail with the wild strawberries which grew —scarlet drops of concentrated lusciousness beneath their protecting leaves of green —in the wooded outskirts of old Al Somer's meadow. Almost he was tempted to turn aside, to slip down through the fields at his left in search of them, until he remembered that they would not be ripe for a month or more.

"The spring is late this year," he murmured regretfully.

Ah well, it could afford to be late. For him it would always be spring hereafter. He threw back his head, unconsciously his hands sought his pockets, his lips drew up in a whistle—the tune was one that had been popular with the country lads when he was a boy.

His thoughts kept up a running commentary on the text supplied by the long appraising glances that took in every detail of the way, identifying the recollections of his youth, marking the changes which time had wrought.

Jonas Dempsy's big barn was not, after all, such a pretentious affair as he had remembered it. And how they had let it run down! It badly needed a coat of paint. Why would they use that dull, muddy red? He smiled a bit ruefully over old Jake Manderson's farm. That long, rambling house, once the height of his ambition — it had been white with green shutters then — was an ugly, nondescript drab. And how low the ceilings must be. What if disillusionment awaited him at the end of his journey! Unconsciously his steps began to lag. He made pretense of noting the growing things on the way; examined the elderberry bushes to see how

soon one might expect the fragrant clusters to spill their snowy loveliness along the road. He even veered out of his path at the shy call of a quail; but he caught no glimpse of the insistent wooer. As he came to a bend in the road his reluctant feet stopped of their own accord. He dared not turn that corner — yet. He sat down on a rock, and still smiling ruefully, sought encouragement from the distant view.

Ah yes! the view was all right. Time had played no tricks with the everlasting hills whose "utmost purple rim," the country folks would tell you proudly, was in another state more than thirty miles away; it was always wrapt in a tender haze — now blue, now softly gray, now rosily purple. They were not awesome crags — nothing terrifying in their rounded outlines. Some giant sculptor with gentle humor had pressed, molded, rumpled up the dear old clay a bit — that was all. The fields were velvety with winter rye, the spring moisture exuded everywhere, steaming up a golden mist in the warm sunshine. Below him, the slow, graceful curve of the valley was soul-satisfying as ever. A slender thread of water gleamed white beneath a

passing cloud, then blue again — reflecting the sky.

With a sigh of relief the man's eyes swept the distance, and with rapidly reviving courage he took the few steps which crossed his morning's Rubicon. Here the road widened, taking a slight drop, and while a fork continued on up to the right, the main thoroughfare stretched out straight and smooth and white over a bit of plateau; and beyond, some hundred yards ahead of him,was the low stone wall he had so longed, yet feared to face. Well, at least it was in good repair — not a crumbling mass of nigger-heads — and covered, as he remembered it, with Virginia creeper and honeysuckle. He drew in a long delighted breath; then, without wasting more time, walked eagerly down to where the wall began. The gate? He would have ridiculed the suggestion. Oh yes, there was a gate farther down, and another one on the opposite side of the property, and a carriage drive not fifty feet away — but he was in no mood to enter sedately through a gate. Putting both hands carefully among the stones, that he might not damage the clinging vines, he vaulted lightly over.

And then this man did a curious thing. Apparently forgetting that he was in full sight of anyone who might have been on the road, he threw his hat in the air as a schoolboy might, swooped down upon it in the grass, and catching sight of a white violet in surprised proximity to his hand, plucked the flower, kissed it, almost—I think—would have cried over it, but for the fact that even as he scrambled somewhat awkwardly to his feet, from behind a clump of flowering dogwood there stepped a wondering girl, the "inevitable girl" the man would have said had he thus suddenly encountered her in the pages of a book.

So far as he could see, the girl had no right there; and yet she was part of it — which is the very nicest thing he could imagine himself saying of a person under the circumstances. For in the picture thus formed — a Corot-like study in greens and blues — the tender grey of her dress was the harmonizing note for which the man was moved to glad thanksgiving.

Someone many years ago, someone with taste and refinement and feeling for all things living, had taken this bit of the world and put

a fence around it, and the people who had since then been fortunate enough to own the house of which one saw ravishing glimpses through the trees, had been wise enough not to attempt to improve much upon the adjoining grounds. They had tended and cared for each growing thing without that insolent moving around of nature's handiwork that more impertinent ones venture. At least, so thought the man, till a basket on the girl's arm attracted his attention and filled him with sudden wrath. For the pretty wicker thing was full, spilling over with violets, white violets — pulled out, no, dug out (he saw the trowel in her hand), roots and all.

"Who are you?" he demanded brusquely.

"The gardener, sir," she said, wide-eyed, with quickly drooping mouth and quivering chin.

"Whose gardener? and what are you doing here?" he continued, brandishing the single flower he held in his hand at the basket of its innocent fellows. "How dare you trespass on private grounds, committing vandalism — larceny — and murder?"

She stared at him affrighted and took a single backward step, but the thicket of dog-

wood barred her retreat. Man-like, her silence and embarrassment pacified him, and he concluded more gently, but still chidingly:

"Didn't you *know* that these were private grounds?"

She eyed him curiously.

"*I* knew it; I thought, perhaps, that *you* did not."

He smiled — at which her confidence grew, and she continued naïvely:

"We have no sign bidding trespassers beware of dogs, and no dogs but old Fidelity, who would not hurt a kitten; but the front gate is always open, as no doubt you did not know, and our visitors *usually* enter that way."

At this it was his turn to look embarrassed.

"I suppose you thought me quite mad. But I still do not understand. You speak of your visitors; do you live here?"

She nodded.

"I see. But how does that happen, may I ask?"

"I told you — I'm the gardener; and when you frightened me so terribly and berated me so cruelly, I was only digging up a few violets — there are so many here — to plant in the

fairyring. Are you not ashamed of yourself?"

"I am!" It was said very seriously.

"And if you had not been so rude, I might have shown it to you."

"But if I offer to carry the basket and make myself useful?" he begged.

She laughed, transferring the basket to his eager hands.

"I accept your help, but I warn you I do not care for useful things in my fairy garden."

"For what, then?"

"Only for dreams." She was leading the way over the soft carpet of grass; in this part of the grounds there were no paths. "*This* is the Garden of Dreams, and" — she pointed poutingly to a large square board facing the road — "that is the only nightmare in it."

"A sign? Ah, I see! 'For Sale.' What a pity! It's a fine old place. A comfortable house, too, I'll be bound."

She waved the compliment aside impatiently.

"Oh, the house is well enough to eat and sleep in; but the garden — the garden is heaven! Wait, you have not seen it yet."

"How long has it been for sale?"

She stopped, petrified. Was she, perhaps, gossiping to a prospective buyer? He read the thought and waited teasingly.

"I — I — oh, I don't know. Eight — perhaps ten years. You don't want to buy it, do you?"

Her anxiety was so patent that he laughed outright.

"Who knows? I might, perhaps, if the price were reasonable. What do they want for it?"

She gasped.

"Oh, thousands of dollars, heaps of money, ever so much more than you would think it worth, unless —" she looked at him more and more suspiciously — "you're not an agent, are you?"

"No."

"I thought not. You see, agents do not usually come over the wall."

Her sigh of relief was so profound that again he laughed. She looked back at him reprovingly.

"You wouldn't think it funny if you had to receive them. They come nosing around into everything from the hotbeds to the attic, finding fault, patronizing, and criticising. And as for the people in search of a summer home,

they suggest improvements before they are well inside the front gate. It's: 'Look, Mother, we could have a fountain here!' 'What a dandy place for a hammock!' 'Oh, Father! wouldn't those marbles you bought in Italy look lovely in there among the evergreens?' and so on. I hate them all. They're bent on spoiling my Garden of Dreams."

"But perhaps," he suggested gently, "they, too, have dreams."

"I don't believe it!" She shook her head violently. "*You* might have." Her clear grey eyes searched his deeply for a moment. "Yes, I'm sure you have dreams. Tell me, do yours ever come true?"

"Sometimes. One came true last week, and fast upon its heels another crystallized into a fact. And then —" he hesitated, while his glance took in the whole of the slender, half-boyish figure beside, yet just a little in advance of him — "yes, I think I may say that to-day another dream — a dream that I had almost given up of late — has come true."

She shook her head reproachfully.

"You must never *give up* having any dream; because, no matter how bad things get, you

can always go away by yourself and dream them different, unless —"

Her voice grew very sad.

"Unless what?" he prompted.

"Unless you make the irreparable mistake," she said softly.

"Which is?—"

"To sell your future dreams for present realities."

"Do you think you — either of us — could ever do that?"

She stopped beside a great rock, dropped on the hillside by some gigantic hand in sport, and looked at him wistfully.

"You see, it isn't always a case of sale, or barter even. Sometimes it's just a mad, free gift. At least, in a woman's life it often happens that way, don't you think?"

"Yes," he admitted gravely.

"And oh, the pity of it," she continued, a sudden flood of divine compassion glorifying her face. "I always think of *The Lay of the Brown Rosary*. You know it?

> If we whose virtue is so weak should have
> a will so strong,
> And stand blind on the rocks to choose the
> right path from the wrong?'"

He nodded and softly finished it for her:

> "'To choose perhaps a love-lit hearth instead of love and heaven —
> A single rose, for a rose-tree which beareth seven times seven.'"

"You see," she continued softly, "of late I have been threatened quite often with losing my Garden of Dreams." She scooped a handful of dried leaves from a large fissure in the rock and drew from beneath them a couple of thin volumes wrapped in oiled silk. "This," she said with a laugh, "is one of my bookcases. Over in that hollow chestnut is another. Down by the brook I have an old tin box hidden under a stone; there is no lock on it, for who would want to lock up Stevenson and Jefferies? They'd die, you know. But you'll be surprised how many hiding places you can find in a garden like this for a book or two. And they help to make one's dreams worth while. But then, when a dream paradise threatens to be swept away, and someone offers you solid reality and abundance — can you understand?"

"Yes. But you chose"—

"The dreams, of course. I could not lose the dreams."

"I am glad," he said simply.

"Here comes mother; she has seen us from the kitchen. Mother is the care-taker; I have looked after the garden — with Jim to help me — ever since father died."

"And who is Jim?" he asked, half-jealously.

"The hired boy. Mother, I am showing this gentleman over the grounds. Why — what has happened, dear?"

The mother acknowledged the presence of the stranger with a preoccupied nod, spoke to her daughter in a worried aside, and hurried back to the house.

"Oh!" moaned the girl; and then again softly to herself: "Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"What is it?" asked the man with concern.

"The house is sold. Mother has just received a letter from the agent. To lose it — after all these years. You don't know what it means!"

"I can imagine."

"I'm afraid I cannot take you around just now. I must help mother get the house in readiness for the new owner."

"Let that wait!"

At the note of command in his voice her eyes widened, and the surprise in her face deepened as he continued:

"Let us go down to the fern-nest together. There used to be a great tree with a solid seat — just large enough for two — built in its branches. Is it still there?"

"Why — yes! But then — you know the place?"

"Indeed I do. And on the way I am going to tell you about a boy, a freckle-faced country boy who sold blackberries and wild strawberries and blueberries in season to the rich folks who lived in that dear old house on the hill. They liked the boy, and he did odd jobs about the place for them. And this grew to be *his* Garden of Dreams. When he was about fifteen his parents died, and because he was ambitious he went to the city; and there he worked a little, studied a little, and worked some more. And he made money, and received a certain measure of what the world calls fame. But always he was dissatisfied; for although he clung to his dreams and would not sell them, even when he was starving, they were never again so beautiful, so fresh, and so true, as the ones he had

dreamt as a boy, lying at full length on his back among the ferns or cuddled in the arms of a tree. One day, just after he had been paid quite a large sum of money for one of the dreams he had worked hard to put into a form that others might enjoy, he picked up a paper, and there, advertised for sale, was his Garden of Dreams — with the house attached, of course. Fancy how he felt! He rushed the purchase through with a haste that scandalized the agent, and having disposed of all his business, took a night train that he might see the sunrise on the road. All the way he was afraid he would be disappointed; it seemed a dubious chance on which to risk one's all. But the moment he came in sight of the place he forgot everything except that at last he owned what he had always wanted; and he was so glad that he jumped the wall, and — well, you saw the rest."

The girl had been looking at him half-incredulously, vacillating between tears and laughter. Now she gave a little satisfied sob.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you! Since I had to lose it — I'm glad it's to someone like you."

"But you are not to think of losing it," he said, much as though he spoke to a child whom he feared to frighten. "You and your mother are to stay here just as you are — for the present. Afterward —" he smiled, as one who forsees long summer days of rest and longings fulfilled, and love, perhaps — "afterward we will talk of other things, compare our dreams together; shall we? Only one assurance I ask now; that you will not think of me as an intruder. Blot me out of the landscape entirely, ignore my existence if you wish, but don't, I beg of you, think of me as an alien."

Excitement had flooded the girl's face with color. Slowly the rosy veil was lifted and left her rather pale, but her eyes shone with clairvoyant certainty.

"You're not!" she said quietly. "I think you belong — in the Garden of Dreams!"

PART I

THE HOUSE OF DREAMS

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

May 20th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

YOU are, it seems, a truer prophet than I had supposed. Your congratulations, which followed so promptly upon my arrival, sweetly sympathetic though they were, held yet a tender little note of reproachful forecast: I would forget the city that had acclaimed me; I would forego the friends of my strenuous middle-age — Ah, Mathilde! how could you? — and slip blandly, smoothly into a sort of second childhood — so near senility you think me, then? — finding in my native village a life so wholly apart from the old that I must seem as unrecognizable to such as had known me in my early prosperity as — well, as a frog might to some little tadpole acquaintances he had distanced by a premature metamorphosis. Mathilde, you beautiful mother-

woman you, I shall never slip from your sweet influence, be assured, never cease to want the friendship you gave me when I so needed it — when it seemed as though but for you and the dear family life into which you admitted me, I might indeed have sold all my dreams of future greatness for a necessary loaf of bread. All that is fifteen years ago, Mathilde, and I owe all that I am to you — and through you to the dear man who, while he lived, made your wish his law. But in those fifteen years I have never failed to thank God for you each night and entreat him for you and yours each morning. Do you think, then, the realization of my castle in Spain and a hundred acres of land will make me forget?

Yet such is the procrastination of the happy idle that though I fully intended to answer your letter at once, I have actually seemed to lend credibility to your doubts by my long delay. Forgive me, Mathilde; it has been the dear, peaceful silence of fulfilled desire, and now that I have broken it, I shall be positively garrulous. Indeed, looking back over the last fortnight, I wondered what possible excuse I could offer for my silence. The days

have never seemed so generously long, the minutes never so roundly full of perfect seconds. Since I came to live in the House of Dreams, three short idyllic weeks ago, I have fallen naturally into the habit of early rising. I, who used to be the laziest and heaviest of sleepers, often find it hard to stay in bed till five o'clock. I think the birds have something to do with this, for they are awake long before the sun. Perhaps, when their days of courtship and nesting are over and the fledglings have taken to the open, the mornings will be more quiet — but I shall miss them. After all, this is their month, the time when their song rises to its utmost perfection, so I do not grudge them their few hours of early practice.

On the morning after my arrival I awoke cold, so cold that as I drew the blankets up about my shoulders and rubbed my nose, I wondered if I had not after all mistaken the month and the season.

As though in ironic answer to my doubt, came through the silence the clear, clucking call of a robin. Three times his summons was repeated, and not until it was taken up by a dozen voices did he break out into his

joyous warble. A cat-bird mewed plaintively from the lilacs and shrubs that hedge the lawn, then rollicked mischievously through its ever surprisingly beautiful song; a little chippy thrilled a sudden spirited greeting to the sun, and a wren from its nest in the eaves bubbled and rippled with fussy good-humor.

My window looks out over the long, slanting shingle roof of the veranda, above which a stately walnut tree waves its many-fingered branches. There are two robin nests now in this walnut, and during these lazy morning hours I have had the joy of hearing their songs change from the stress and storm and poignant sweetness of courtship, to the solemn peace and pride of assured possession. They have quickly, too, become accustomed to the inquisitive face that haunts the window, and one bold adventurer has lately grown so self-possessed as to vocalize on the sill — peering in the while, impertinently curious and critical of my morning ablutions.

But on that first day I buried my face among the pillows that smelt a bit musty to a hypersensitive nose, and because I felt absolutely at peace with myself and the world, went calmly off to sleep again right in the middle

of the first movement of their symphony — for which discourtesy I hope I have since atoned by awaking at the opening notes of the reveille, and religiously remaining attentive to the entire performance.

In fact, I usually try not to go back to sleep at all. It is so good to lie there in the clear, cold dawn and count my many new possessions, and dream of others yet to be added to them. I am like a child at Christmas — so overwhelmed with my sudden wealth of toys that I do not know which to play with first. I say to myself: "To-day I will explore the attic; no, I will keep the attic for a stormy day — this promises to be fine; I will visit the orchard. But first I must see if the little wood that clings to the side of the hill wears the same primeval aspect it held for me when a boy." The Major would never permit a tree to be touched — although no one from the Hall ever walked there — and you could climb straight up a rather precipitous slope and come out on a little ledge of virgin forest. If other feet had ever wandered there, the soft carpet of dead leaves, inches and inches thick, held no trace of them. The trees grew very close together, tall and slender for the most

part, save where some parent hickory or maple had a quarter-of-a-century start of the energetic young saplings around it. It was a great place for the spring and early-summer flowers, the most timid of them taking advantage of their safety to show their faces quite boldly. It was the favorite haunt of the pippsessewa and her fragrant cousin, the shin-leaf. There the Solomon's seal waved its greenish plume, the partridge-vine allowed its pale-faced twins a peep at the world from under their blankets of dead oak and hickory leaves, and even before these, you could find the star-eyed liverwort and the snowy-petaled blood-root — and arbutus too, but in rather scanty measure.

At the memory of this treasure-trove I start from bed, eager to renew my explorations — but always I find some other outlet for the day's energies. The fact is, I do not wish to revisit these woods till Miranda is with me.

Miranda! Ah, now your sensitive patrician nose scents a romance; and even at this early stage, dear lady, I am prepared to hope that you are right. Perhaps you remember that I told you in my first hasty note that I had

been confronted on my arrival by a most adorable comic-opera shepherdess who assured me that she was the gardener. I think I also mentioned that Miss Rowen was the daughter of the Professor Rowen whose biological work had brought him much fame but little money, and whose poor health had led him to exchange his professorship for an extended lease on life in the homely capacity of care-taker of this mountain estate. I imagine that the name Miranda was his choice, but I wonder what prophetic intuition was responsible for that christening. *Miranda!* Dear lady, it suits her. Some day I shall try to describe her — I have only general impressions so far. There is an evanescent quality of beauty and temperament that defies imprisonment.

Well, on that first morning as I left the breakfast room, I found the hall door open, and had a glimpse of Miss Rowen armed for the day's work. It was something of a shock. I had fancied her playing at gardening, she had looked so dainty and unprofessional with her basket of violets on her arm. Now she wore an old dress of faded blue, with a big blue apron all cut up into pockets. All sorts

of ominous things peeped from these pockets; a trowel, a pair of shears, twine, and some little sticks. She was very busy transferring a nursery of plants from their wooden box to the row of little holes which she had gouged out neatly in the unoffending earth, and over in the path stood a wheel-barrow heaped high with newly cut grass.

She did not see me. I watched the pretty picture for quite a time before I stepped out to her.

"Good morning, Miranda."

She started, straightening up suddenly.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"My name."

"I didn't. I wasn't even guessing."

"Then you meant *Shakespeare's* Miranda?"

"Surely. And *Prospero's* — and *Ferdinand's*. (I muttered the last under my breath so that she did not hear me.)

"I see. I thought —"

"It was a happy chance," I said gallantly. "The name suits you, which is more than most names do their owners. But Miranda — may I call you so as a reward for my perspicacity? — I have a quarrel with you.

Why have you cut my grass?"

She looked distressed.

"I told mother you would not like it. I suppose a lawn must be kept as a lawn, but I always feel as reluctant to cut it as a mother over the first shearing of her baby boy's ringlets."

"Not a bad comparison," I grumbled. "It is indeed as ungraceful as the average masculine hair-cut."

Miranda laughed.

"Just now it is; but in a day or two it will be lovely; soft, velvety, wonderfully green—a clean-faced, irreproachably-groomed lawn, sir!"

It was my turn to laugh.

"But that is a man's work. Where is Jim?"

"Oh no! Jim's province is the kitchen garden. It is too early for him to offer you much — but you shall have some *romaine* for dinner."

"Good! It is the queen of salads."

Miranda smiled at my gastronomic ecstasy.

"You speak like an epicure, yet your looks belie you."

I raised offended eyebrows with an attempted severity.

"Am I then so lean and hungry-looking?"

Miranda studied me thoughtfully, and spoke with analytic care.

"An ascetic, not by choice but by habit, a habit that grew on you as the result of necessity, perhaps, and was not relinquished with the passing of the need for it."

Wasn't that clever? The description was not flattering, yet because of something in Miranda's eyes I could not resent it.

"You are right," I said, half apologetically. "I suppose I have even earned the title of *miser*, since I kept the pose of self-denial long beyond the days of real poverty. Now I know that I practiced economy all this time merely that I might some day own the Garden of Dreams. Since I have that—" I smiled to myself, waved my hand gayly to Miranda, and sauntered on down to see if perchance I might find a single winged cyclamen left to mark the place where the daffodils and crocus had long since bloomed.

I could not very well explain to this serious-minded child, with her adorable conscience, that since I had obtained that for which I had denied myself I would probably never do another stroke of work again as long as I

lived, nor could I tell her that I was beginning to look on all the joys that life had heretofore denied me with a dogged determination to own them — to make them mine. To live, to love, to learn; I care not a *fico* ever to produce anything again. Therein I show conclusively that I am no genius — Mathilde and a few generously inclined critics to the contrary. I admit to myself without reservation that my work has not satisfied; that always, always, I have been hungry — hungry with an appetite that refused to be appeased with the more or less skillful juggling of words, the chess game of plot and counterplot, the play of sentiment and fancy.

How is it that you alone of all my friends, you — whose arms and heart have never known what it was to be empty — you, with your adorable daughter and her infant son, and Alfred with his enthusiasms and riotous affections, have alone shown me that sympathetic understanding that can never have been born of experience, have let me lave my lonely heart in the flood-tide of your life, have done your best that I should never feel the futility of my make-believe? You are very wonderful, Mathilde, and it is because

of all that you are that I write so to you. Long ago you shared with me all that you had; long ago I made a vow to share with you whatever of joy and light there might come into my life.

But all this is far away from that first day. I remember thinking that another spring we would have thousands of snowdrops and quaint blue squills peeping up beneath the evergreens, while the strip of meadow on the south side should be gladdened with narcissi and daffodils. Which reminds me that I must commission Miranda to order the bulbs before I forget it.

Dear Mathilde, you will write soon again — will you not? However much I err towards you, you are always there with your divine forbearance.

My love to the children. If anything I have said can tempt you from your barren city streets to gladden me with the visit you so graciously promise, I shall not have written in vain. The lad must be nearly through his university work. Surely then you can both come.

Devotedly yours,

SAMUEL GARTH WINTERS.

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winter to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

June 2nd, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

THIS morning we were cut off from the world by a sheet of silver mist — a mist that promptly resolved itself into a slanting, steady downpour. It is the first real storm since my arrival, and I think I never heard such music. I lay abed two long hours, listening, and I have about decided that of all the *wood* instruments I prefer a shingle roof — provided it is properly played upon by an orchestra of raindrops. When you make us a visit I shall try to arrange for a shower for your especial benefit.

I was down late for breakfast. Miranda was just bringing in a glass bowl of wild strawberries.

"In all this rain!" I exclaimed.

"Jim brought them over — the very first of the season. You must make a wish on them."

"How do you do it?"

"You should close your eyes and say the wish over three times — while the berry slowly melts into fragrance and flavor on the tongue."

"Have you had some?"

"There's only a cupful," she deprecated. "Those green leaves are deceiving."

"Nevertheless"—

"But I've eaten them every spring all these years that you have hungered—"

"I should *still* be unsatisfied unless there were someone to share them. We will make our wish together."

We went through the ritual reverently, and as our eyes unclosed, laughed half-guiltily — like foolish children.

"I will tell you my wish"— I began, but Miranda interrupted in mock horror:

"You mustn't! You will never get it if you do."

I reflected that she was probably right, and contented myself by adding with a smile: "Some day!"

"Oh!" said Miranda, with a touch of confusion, and left me to my eggs and bacon.

I tell you this because, in a manner, it answers your question. Dear lady, come and see for yourself! You will find Miranda a ravishing mixture of all that is most alluring in child and woman. To aspire to her seems profanation. She is twenty-three, and

I, alas! am forty — an elderly sort of forty, too, at best. But I ask myself sometimes if it isn't perhaps because I never enjoyed the gay insouciance of a care-free youth. I was old at sixteen — older far than I am now that I can snap my fingers at the wolf and his snarling clan. Sometimes, Mathilde, I feel very young; at such times Miranda eyes me with that maternal tolerance that is always present in the maiden's heart for the one man. Whereupon I shake my bells and tell foolish stories and am a very clown — for joy in her divine forbearance.

You do not tell me when Arthur's work will be over. When will you feel free to make us that promised visit? The dear lad has surely earned a long vacation. I wish you could both be induced to spend it here. Consider it, will you, Mathilde?

As ever, affectionately yours,

SAMUEL WINTERS.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

June 8th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

YOU are no doubt right, dear lady. Such days and days of industrious idling, of leisurely pottering about the house and grounds, will destroy my capacity for serious work. At least, I hope so. Do not forget, Mathilde — indeed, I know that you do not, and say this more to justify myself to myself than to you — that I have worked all my life, and for the most part very seriously. I think I was not more than five years old when I had my daily tasks. No harm in that, you understand, except that they lasted *all day*. No, no, Mathilde! you cannot chide my ambitions into a tardy resurrection. There is a task which I hope to set myself some day, to which I will gladly lend all the energies of my remaining years. It is a duty which you have nobly fulfilled, and the objects of your labor of love rise up and call you blessed. To see that which is born in the likeness of the beloved one and of yourself grow into adolescence at your side, is to have the chance, at least,

to remold one's youth nearer to the heart's desire. (With apologies to Omar.)

We have had a great deal of rain this week — for which the farmers are duly grateful. As for the garden, even the wonder-world of my recollections never seemed fairer to me than has the Miranda-governed garden of this spring. The shrubs, especially, have outdone themselves — the thorns, the lilacs, the azaleas, and now the rhododendrons — while the borders are a perfect riot of German iris and columbines.

This morning, after breakfast, I went into the library with the laudable intention of setting it in order. It is a room that I have entered only once since my arrival. There are several reasons for this neglect. In the first place, it is a great bare room — bare of books as a last year's walnut, robbed of its kernel by some maurauding squirrel, is of meat. The polished floor, the high wainscoting (the room is finished in age-darkened oak), and the rows of empty shelves seemed reproachfully to remind me that I have vowed to be done with books — the making of them, at least. In one corner of the library — and therein was my second reason which I might

call a certain delicacy, a hesitation at intruding too suddenly into the private places of a woman's soul — Miranda had kept a portion of the spirit of the room alive. In the bay window stood a low worktable with a little sewing-chair beside it; an old-fashioned desk, over which a brass candlestick and a tiny bust of Shelley kept guard, flanked one side, while a generously-cushioned arm chair was drawn up in friendly communion with three low shelves which held an alluring collection of well-worn books. On that first day, as Miranda stood beside me in the center of the long, dull room, this little nook, aglow with prismatic flecks of dying sunlight and bathed in broad shafts of mellow amber, seemed like a sanctuary. It was with something of an effort that I refrained from stepping up to examine the contents of the shelves —so eager was I to know Miranda better. Yet although I have now been here a month and more, the secret of her library is still inviolate. I feel that I can trust Miranda. To know the books a woman loves is to know what company her spirit keeps, and to know that is to grasp all her possibilities both for good and evil. But I am content to wait,

knowing that Miranda cannot disappoint me.

Imagine, therefore, my chagrin as I stood in the doorway and realized that although the few pieces of furniture were undisturbed, the books and feminine belongings had vanished. Going at once to the door of the breakfast-room I called, and at my voice Miranda appeared from the kitchen. Then I stepped back across the hall, Miranda following me, and we stood together in the doorway, looking into the somber room, which seemed with its rain-swept outlook more dismal than ever.

"Miranda — how could you?" I reproached.

She held up a protesting hand.

"Don't — don't scold."

"I must. You have taken away your playthings."

"But there are boxes and boxes of books upstairs to be unpacked, and every inch of available space is likely to be taken up —"

"With vulgar trash!" I interrupted. "With *Compendiums* and *Treasuries of Verse*, and ponderous sets of *World's Best Literature* and tiresome old duffers whom nobody reads; while yours — Miranda! I haven't an inkling

of what those shelves contained, but they looked so homey and friendly."

"But not decorative. Besides, I always understood that the last owner of the Hall was quite a literary gentleman."

I made a wry face. Miranda does not suspect that I write. I wonder if she would call *me* a literary gentleman? Bless the child! She has lived in this enchanted garden with her schoolbooks and her classics until she does not know that such a thing as a "best seller" exists; certainly I'll not be the one to tell her.

Nor did I attempt to disturb her illusion about the late owner of the Hall. It is true that in my blackberrying days I had held him in great awe, but remembering some of the questions he had asked that ignorant boy and the advice he had given him, I have long since recognized in him the country Polonius — "a tiresome old fool" with a medley of assorted and invariably pilfered philosophies; so that I looked forward to acquaintance with his library with but scant enthusiasm.

Before long the room was filled with boxes, brought in under the careful superintendence

of Mrs. Rowen and opened by Jim, while Miranda and I hovered anxiously about, dipping into them at random.

It was true that Miranda urged that we do the work systematically, but even her conscientiousness was not proof against the eagerness which every true book-lover feels at sight of a box crammed with unknown possibilities. You would have loved, Mathilde, to see the innate reverence with which she lifted out and dusted and sorted and stacked the books into little piles around her on the floor, or to hear her exclaim pityingly at broken corners or a mildewed cover. Meeting my eyes, however, her own twinkled merrily as she tapped the red morocco of a Boswell's *Johnson*, and declared she would save that for after-dinner reading during the summer.

I was helping Jim with a crate of encyclopædias of a forgotten and long since superseded issue, when from the depths of a new box Miranda quoted gleefully:

> At last, because the time was ripe,
> I chanced upon the poets.

And with a little satisfied "Oh, this is better!" sank down in a soft, adoring, childish

heap on the floor before it, pulling out first one volume, then another, opening them at random, nibbling here and there like a hungry mouse. Smiling at her enjoyment I left her with her find, while Mrs. Rowen and I disposed with scant ceremony of long rows of *de luxe* editions whose uncut pages and tarnished gilt told a pathetically incongruous tale. They are a nightmare — albeit a somewhat grotesque one, and a trifle less depressing than the empty shelves. Perhaps, after all, I shall become productively industrious again and devote the proceeds to showing Miranda what a library should be like. At present, my trunkful of books shall find lodgment in the cozy little upstairs room I have set apart for a study.

Mrs. Rowen's announcement that dinner was ready recalled Miranda to the actual world of dust and disorder. She looked at me reproachfully as she rid her lap of the Brownings and Tennysons and dumped the whole Victorian brotherhood — Pre-Raphaelites and all — on the floor.

"Why did you let me waste the morning so?" she wailed. "I never should have opened the first book. Why didn't you shake me?"

"I envied you your absorption. I was only too glad that you had found something worth while."

"It was wonderful," admitted Miranda thoughtfully. "Things I've read a hundred times before seemed newly illumined — as though someone infinitely wise and good had me by the hand."

"That can't be the ghost of the late Major," I said. "At least, I don't recognize him by your description."

"See!" said Miranda, putting into my outstretched hand two slender volumes bound in gray. They were proper, precise, essentially ladylike volumes, and even before I had verified the name on the flyleaf they recalled the forgotten image of the Major's sister. You would have liked Miss Cynthia, Mathilde. Silver-haired, placid, exquisitely virginal, she had yet a fiery sparkle in her large brown eyes that made it easy to imagine her surreptitiously reading — the latest Swinburne, for instance, considered then a highly immoral poet whom none but the most advanced would read. She had not been guilty of the insolence of annotation, but the books had evidently been well and attentively

read, for they were sprinkled with little, fine, wavering lines that were as clear and sharp now as when Miss Cynthia's gold pencil had made them. God bless her! she was good to me and to my mother.

How I ramble along to you, Mathilde; I who abominate letters and can scarcely bring myself to the veriest business note. It is because, dear lady, I am so very sure of being understood that I bring my singing heart to you to be rejoiced over. I wait longingly for your visit. I would have you know Miranda. How I wish I dared have written *my Miranda.*

Affectionately your friend,

SAMUEL WINTERS.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

June 11th, 19—

OH, but I *am* disappointed — more than I can say. Yet of course I agree with you. I am delighted — for the children's sake — that you have the opportunity for this Maine summer, and since the doctor wishes Eloise to go at once there is nothing for it but to forego your visit for the present. Shall we make it October? It is the most regal month of all the year — up here among the hills.

You dear Woman-heart! And do you really think that I could know a Miranda without telling her how much I owe a Mathilde? I think she is even more disappointed than I am, since I suspect her of a natural curiosity to see what sort of a friend such an old fogy as myself would have.

I am glad to tell you that after two days of hard work we have finished the library. It looks just as I remember it, with all the old books and pictures restored to their places. Some day I may change it — to suit a wife, for instance — but at present I like to see it

as it used to look when I waited for the Major's orders while he finished his game of solitaire, and Miss Cynthia embroidered in the window. Miranda does not embroider, a point in which she differs from Miss Cynthia. Yes, it is good to feel that this great house, which seemed so colossal and magnificent to my boyish eyes, is mine at last, and that I need no longer wander clandestinely through the garden to shuffle up the steps of the kitchen porch, but may boldly enter in at the massive oaken doors that guard from too rude awakenings the sleepers in the House of Dreams.

I shall not expect a letter from you until you are settled. I know how disturbing to your dear methodical soul such a migration must be; but drop me a postal with your address. I expect the book in from the publishers within a day or two, and you must be the first to have a copy.

As ever your friend,

SAMUEL WINTERS.

PART II

DOWN DREAMLAND'S LANE

[*A letter from Miranda Rowen to Dorothy Roscome*]

June 17th, 19—

Dear Dorothy:

YOU are a mischievous little tease, and if I did not love you so I should be really provoked with you. What nonsense, Dorothy! you know very well that that is not the reason I do not want to come to Boston. When did I ever visit you, you rogue, in June? How could I leave the garden in the loveliest, busiest month of all, and in this most probably our last summer, when it's more beautiful than it ever was before — perhaps because I must so soon lose it. Indeed, Dorothy, I think it will be much more likely that I will defer my usual August visit, since by October we will probably have said goodbye to the Hall forever. That is, if you'll have me then.

Mother and I are planning all sorts of ventures, but really we have no more idea what

to do than two babes in the wood. I suppose more ambitious people would have foreseen and provided against such a contingency long ago. As a matter of fact I should have taken the man's part when my dear, tired father laid down the load — but what? Alas! Daddy's ideas of education were beautifully broad and splendidly impractical. Now if only someone wanted a girl to pass an examination on Spencer, Darwin, and Huxley, or Browning, Stevenson, and Burroughs, I might stand some chance. Then, too, how could we leave this place — so loved for itself and its associations with my father — as long as we could live as we did? Of course, now it's different. Mr. Winters is simply dear — so kind, so delicate, so diffident. What he is really trying to manage for us is to persuade mother to stay on the old terms for doing practically nothing. He has provided her with a helper — a rather inefficient but very willing country girl — and he has insisted on a boy for the garden. More hindrance than help he is at present, though I was really glad of his assistance last month; I was late getting out the perennials this year, there were so many things to be attended to indoors.

But you should see the garden now. The two long beds that border the walk are already magnificent with larkspur, foxglove, and the rich crimson of the peony, with Canterbury bells and sweet William and spicy pinks; the golden glow will soon make the old stone wall that cuts off the back of the garden from the woods a riotous bank of color; as for the phloxes, I am afraid they will dwarf everything else in sight. I divided them last fall, and had no idea there were still so many; I think we have every shade in which a phlox ever dared bloom. We will have lots of poppies, too — the beauties! two long beds of them, scarlet and pink and white, to flirt like gossamer coryphees in the summer breeze, and furl their silken sails at night to guard the drowsy sweets within.

Mr. Winters actually does not suggest a single change. He is restoring all the old pictures and books to their places, and seems to remember how everything in the lower rooms used to look. It was wonderful — the day in the library; he arranged one shelf from which the Major's sister had allowed him to borrow books when he was a boy, over and over again until he got each volume where it

used to stand; and he was quite upset because an old copy of *Huckleberry Finn* was missing —said out loud several times, as though speaking to Miss Cynthia: "I'm very sure I returned it! I distinctly remember returning it!" It quite made me love him, though it did not surprise me. His whole attitude is one of perfect loyalty to his beginnings; his origin, the hard life of his parents, his own lack of opportunity, his poverty and early struggles, he never mentions except with a certain gentle deference, as though he gave them the credit for everything since accomplished.

He told me quite a great deal about his youth this afternoon, and incidentally I found out something I had half suspected. *He is an author!* He had not intended telling me. How foolish, when we both love books so. But he says he doesn't write books; not real books, but just stories that are called "best sellers," and asked me how I had come to suspect him. I told him that it was rather hard to unravel the exact train of thought that had resulted in his conviction, but that perhaps the most tangible clue had been a number of short stories I had read while in

Boston on a visit, some years ago. You must have seen them — *Moonstone and Amber.* I remembered that they had been by a Mr. Winters whose initials I had promptly forgotten, but whose literary ego lingered. Perhaps that was why from the first moment Mr. Winters seemed like an old acquaintance. I used to wonder why, until suddenly one day, behind the hazy veil of some treasured impression, Mr. Winters, the author, peered over the shoulder of the new owner of the Hall and admitted mischievously: "Why, certainly! I'm Mr. Winters, *the* Mr. Winters! Don't you know me?" and I had much ado to keep from falling on his neck and greeting him as a long lost friend — but I did not tell him that.

He seemed well pleased that I liked the stories — surely you recall them? tender, idyllic, springlike fancies, full of haunting, whimsical suggestions. He said that they had been written a good many years ago and republished from various magazines, but that they had failed to attract much attention. I asked him to let me read them again and he willingly agreed, but seemed very shy over the novels.

You should see the roads about here now. The meadows swim in a hazy, twinkling sea of blue above the long spears of grass, and the brook is fairly hemmed in on each side by masses of blue flag. Daddy used to say that blue flowers always love the water.

Dear Daddy! I never miss him so much as in the spring. I have thought of him almost constantly today. In fact,—I dare admit it to you, Dorothy, because, with all your teasing, you are such an understanding sort of a girl,—there are times when I see him. More frequently than ever before I look up from some task of transplanting or weeding to find him standing over me, his dear gray eyes, so short-sighted for human failings or peculiarities, fixed upon me in kindly benison. And then the haze of sudden tears blinds me for a moment, and when I can see again it is only Mr. Winters, pausing in his round of the garden to note the progress of the rosebuds. I think that is why I feel so much at home with him. I never thought to meet a man so like my father.

But enough of all this, Dorothy dear. So you really think you'll go back to Castine this summer? I wish I could visit you in August

as I did last year. Perhaps things will arrange themselves so that I can. Until then we must be content with letters. What volumes I write to you always.

Your

MIRANDA.

* * *

[*A letter from Miranda Rowen to her dead father*]

My own dear Daddy:

SUCH a beautiful June night! Just such a night as used to find you wandering bareheaded and coatless beneath the stars. Do you remember the evening you strayed down Dreamland's Lane and wandered off into the meadow, and when we heard your call and went out to your rescue we found you — very bewildered and very wet — in the middle of the cow-pond, rooted among the reeds and lilies? I have wanted you so much all day, dear; and I turn to you as naturally in writing as I used to do in my school-girl days, when I eased my exile by nightly recitals of my daily exploits, for you to puzzle over. Besides, I must write tonight, or go quite mad with the loveliness of it all. I have just

written a long, long letter to Dorothy. If you were here you would furrow up your beautiful forehead till your eyebrows fairly bristled in your effort to remember, and say — "Dorothy! Dorothy! Let me see. She's the comfortable little body with the curls, isn't she?" And I would pretend to scold you for your uncertainty, and at last admit that she was. Only, that she doesn't wear curls now, and is getting so roly-poly that I'm afraid it isn't comfortable at all. But she's just the same dear, fussy, good-humored little sympathizer, and you'd love her if — if — — Oh Daddy! Daddy! Why did you have to go away?

But I musn't think of that unless I want to find myself at one end of the long, long problem for which there never seems to be any solution. Some day, I tell myself, I will sit down and think it all out conscientiously — as you would have me do — the "why" of life — as far as I can see it. But not yet!

I had such a beautiful walk with Mr. Winters this afternoon. I really felt very much gratified at being wanted, for I think the ramble was intended to pick up his boyhood days where he had dropped them.

We followed the brook, Daddy, as you and I used to do, by crossing over from side to side whenever the bank ended in a tangle of flag or bolted down into a jungle of pickerel-weed. At last we left the sunny fields and meadows and dipped down between the hills. Mr. Winters asked if they still called it *Paradise Valley.* I told him yes, but that for me I should sooner think of the *hills* as Paradise. He smiled thoughtfully.

"How white a soul yours must be, Miranda. There are times when even the view from *Mont Salvat* (so he calls the Hall) will make me long to find some hidden nook in this little ravine where so poor a thing as I may take refuge."

I really didn't know how to explain; I can't talk well on personal matters, but I think it is because I have not lived much that I am unafraid of what the hills reveal. Perhaps I, too, shall love the valley best when I grow old. But goodness! Mr. Winters is not really old, and the quick, boyish smile that plays so radiantly about his mouth when your fancy chimes in well with his is more than compensation for his fast graying hair — which is probably responsible for the feeling

that he's rather old — which he really isn't. Dear Daddy! how you would have shuddered at such English.

But we did not see the hills to-day. Instead we kept to the shaded lanes until we reached the wood. He wanted to show me the Indian Cave where he played as a boy — as though I did not know it well. But when we came here I was almost too old to play at Indians. I would slip in among the underbrush, and loosening my short skirt pin it up tunic-fashion over one arm, and forthwith emerge a timid Imogen or jaunty Rosalind as the mood directed. How often, leaning on the alpenstock you cut me for climbing, I have stood between the beeches, and softening and deepening my girlish treble to the orotund I thought Shakespeare required, sighed to an imagined Touchstone:

Well, this is the Forest of Arden!

or brandishing a make-believe sword at the ridiculously tiny opening of the cave, fluttered out a timid:

> Ho! who's here?
> If anything that's civil, speak: if savage,
> Take or lend. Ho!—No answer? Then I'll enter.
> Best draw my sword; and if mine enemy
> But fear the sword like me, he'll scarcely look on't.
> Such a foe, good heavens!

Oh, those happy days! Quite as radiantly, blissfully happy was I, with my make-believe, as the boy with his bit of a candle and his wicked looking cutlass (a rusty broken sickle rescued from the blacksmith's scrap-heap). I did not know that you could enter the cave, but he says that he remembers that when he crawled flat upon his stomach the length of his body (he was then a boy of ten), the tunnel widened and deepened until there was space large enough to turn around and sit quite comfortably facing the opening, with knees drawn up, hands clasping them, and eyes staring out into the circle of green beyond. It must have been a thrilling sensation — when you were an escaped convict with a price on your head, or the slaughterer of an entire tribe of Indians doomed to fearful torture should you be captured.

We came home by Somer's place and down through Dreamland's Lane. Before I thought I had called it by that old name of my own christening, and of course he wanted to know why. Do you remember the day you left me sitting by the roadside while you went over to Somer's — that time he hurt his arm? It was very warm and I was tired, and when

you got back you found me asleep and evidently in the throes of a most distressing dream.

You may guess how embarrassed I was when Mr. Winters asked me if I would tell him the dream. I hardly knew what to say. I had never even told you, yet I hated to make a mystery of nothing, especially after mentioning the matter of my own accord, so I made light of it, begging him to remember that I was not then out of my teens, was very romantic, and inclined to be religious, and that I had been reading poetry till my brain was addled. I will tell it to you, now, as I told it to him.

It seemed — in my dream — that I was going hither and thither over the face of the earth seeking someone. At first, as I looked for him in the cities and by the sea, I did not know just who it was that I sought; but gradually it came to me — although I still could not see his features — that it was my mate. And everywhere I went was the same answer made to my questions: "He is not here!"

Finally I came to the edge of the world, against whose purple shore a white-winged

boat stood ready; but ere I entered it I looked reluctantly back, not satisfied to go until I heard a voice that said: "He whom you seek is not on earth!"

In the boat I sailed to Heaven—and the interval of sailing was as a flash of lightning. And there again began my search, and someone halted me and said: "What is he like — this man you seek?"

And I answered: "I do not know; but when I see him I shall know."

And after I had sought through Heaven in vain I went to Hell; and there it was I cried bitter tears of fear and dread. But he was not there, and even as my father woke me a voice cried out: "*The man you seek is not yet born!*"

Was it not a strange, uncanny dream? When I had told it to Mr. Winters the silence that followed seemed very long. Then he said gently:

"Are you superstitious, Miranda?"

"I think not. Why?"

"Do you believe that dream?"

"Oh no; though I've sometimes thought that — well, of course, it might prove true."

I could have bitten out my tongue that had

led me into so morbidly personal a conversation when he said:

"Don't believe it, Miranda. You must not believe it; it would be too sad for you — and me."

I don't know what I answered. I know that after a frightened silence I caught up my courage and my wits in both hands and gave the conversation a mighty wrench, and set it spinning safely and tamely again on barnyard subjects; but oh, how my heart did beat!

It was all my fault, of course; mine — and that silly dream's. But how I should hate it if Mr. Winters, whom I really like and admire very much, should think the occasion demanded flattery and pretty speeches; should leave his attitude of sensitive, friendly scholarliness for that of the middle-aged gallant. Oh dear! It must never happen again. I must keep my dreams under lock and key hereafter. Or better still, tell them only to you. Dear Daddy, if only I knew how it is with you to-night. It is always at night that I want you most. Sometime I know that I shall go out into the garden, down between the lilacs you loved so much, to meet

you as I used to do. If only I could know that you would not fail me then. It is almost midnight, and there is no other light in the house. Even the lamp in Mr. Winters' study went out some time ago. As for mother, she has been asleep for hours — little dreaming what foolish fancies possess me. Such a blessed darkness broods about the house. How can people in the cities bear the impertinent intrusion of electric lights and gas lamps into the sacred privacy of the night? Presently I shall blow out my lamp and darkness will fall upon me like a benison.

Good-night, Father, Good-night. God love and bless you, dear, in that mysterious beyond.

PART III

THE DESERTED ORCHARD

[A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey]

August 10th, 19.—

Dear Mathilde:

AT last your welcome letter! Oh, I know I've been remiss and deserved no better at your hands, but Mathilde, you were never one for treating "every man according to his deserts," so that I really felt quite alarmed at your long silence. Fancy then how delighted we were when we heard of you indirectly through Miranda's friend, Miss Dorothy Roscome. Such a glowing account of your trip together up Casco Bay, and the sweet hospitality of the little bungalow among the hackmatacks! She is really a most appreciative little person — is Miss Dorothy. She writes of you — "Such a wonderful grandmother — with such a young face and figure, and such beautiful white hair, such merry eyes and humorous chin, such firm white hands — so large and capable,

so warm and vital." I shall certainly have to know Miss Dorothy.

And then on top of her letter came yours — and evidently the good impression was mutual. But you must not form any impression of Miranda from her chum. We have many pictures of Miss Dorothy, and nothing further from Miranda could be imagined than that roly-poly little person. You say that she sings Miranda's loveliness in every key imaginable. Now listen while I join in the chorus. I have never tried to describe her, because while with her I have always found myself seeing the soul — the lovely personality of her — rather than the body, and afterwards catch myself wondering just what color her eyes are anyway. Such a confession from a lover! but Miranda would understand it. Because her eyes are gray — deep gray, shadowy, velvety in certain lights, the eyes of the dreamer, the mystic, the scholar, and yet saved from impracticability by the alertness of the brows. Indeed Miranda's eyes are deceiving. I have discovered that there is no little living thing along the road that ever escapes her, though I may feel quite easy with a faded necktie or an unshaved

chin. A comfortable sort of a girl you will admit, Mathilde, to live with.

She is like a fawn — so slender, so supple, so graceful. Her hair shines like a fresh horse-chestnut in a pool of sunlight. I need not tell you that she neither crimps nor waves it, nor otherwise tortures it into standing on end, but wears it softly framing her face — as God meant women's hair to grow. Her skin — why I believe she's golden clear through! So tenderly have the elements dealt with her that you would not guess she was tanned unless you caught a glimpse of the white flesh beneath the golden throat. For the rest, she is perhaps five feet four — an adorable height in a woman, that allows you to think of them as short or tall, as the occasion — or your mood — demands.

Do you wonder at the audacity that would dare offer in exchange for this dryad's heart the middle-aged tenderness of a romantic bachelor? Sometimes I grow afraid and want to run away and leave her to the virginal calm in which I found her. At other times I am bold, daring to believe that no one could understand Miranda so well as I do. She, dear child, looks at me from such frank, un-

troubled eyes that I am often tortured with doubts. I can imagine that just so may she have looked at her father. On such occasions she does not seem her age — she will be twenty-four next week — and I think wild schemes for suggesting to Mrs. Rowen that I adopt her. At other moments, when the sweet laughter ripples from her round throat at some idiocy of mine, I throw my forty years to the winds and vow that if only Miranda will love me I will be a boy again.

I note all that you say of *The Afterglow.* I am glad indeed that you like it, for in spite of all that you can urge, I feel that it is the last I shall write — the last novel, I mean. Oh, I do not promise to abstain entirely. I am too wedded to the pen, and besides, the habit of self-expression is a persistent one that may not always be indulged at the expense of one's friends.

Good-bye, Mathilde; my love to all your dear ones. I suppose the wonder-boy is more cherubic than ever. Tell Eloise that I shall expect her to bring him for a long visit some time soon. So far as I am concerned she need not wait till he has passed what she is pleased to call the caveman stage. I like

cavemen when they wear golden curls and blue-checked rompers.

I am, as ever, dear Mathilde,

Yours most devotedly,

SAMUEL GARTH WINTERS.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

September 9th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

ANOTHER love of a gray morning. It must have rained during the night, or else the dew is unsually heavy — for everything is jeweled. A cobweb that hangs from the eaves aslant across my window has dipped with the weight of dewdrops till it forms a fairy hammock. Anything quite so perfect I never saw; diamonds caught upon an invisible thread, with here and there a moonstone, perhaps. What a hair-net for Titania! The nasturtiums in the great stone basin beneath my window hold such a display upon their silvered leaves as would turn a lapidary green with envy. I can imagine the jewel-weeds along the brook; it is on

such a morning as this that they justify their name.

Just now I spied Miranda — rubber-booted, rubber-coated, an old sou'wester on her chestnut locks — sallying forth through the drizzle, a little basket on her arm. I know well what that means — Mushrooms! Broiled mushrooms garnishing a Spanish omelette, or mushrooms drunk with cream — in which to smother the fried chicken. Ah! do I make you hungry? Wretch! I would fain make you hungry; we *live* here! Our vegetables, our fruits come to us rich in the earth salts; you cannot say as much for your Broadway cafe.

I would dearly love to join Miranda in her hunt for the toothsome agarics, but that I know the dear women are planning to surprise me. Miranda thinks me snug abed, and so I would have been but for the witchery of the morning.

What nonsense you talk, Mathilde. Don't, I pray you, do Miranda such a wrong. She is as eager to hear of you as I am to talk. Why, when Miss Roscome's letter came she fairly danced into the library. "What do you think?" she cried. "You never would guess

in a hundred years. My Dorothy and your Mathilde have met. It must be the same. See, she says — 'A Mrs. Bursey who is here with her son and married daughter.' Oh, I *am* so pleased. Having Dorothy meet her is the next best thing to meeting her myself. Here! Of course you will want to read the letter; it's almost all about your friend." Then suddenly she flushed, and added, in confusion — "Or, perhaps I'd better read it to you."

I notice that she omitted the last page. I wonder what girlish secret was hidden on that page? I am growing older and sillier each day; I swear I fancy that I saw my name.

Here comes Miranda back again. She has robbed the peach orchard and investigated the edges of the cornfield. Is there any music to compare with the silken rustle of the wind through a cornfield on a September day? Also I shouldn't wonder if she had paid her respects to the fairy-ring, where little fawn-colored god-children of the same name cluster thickly on a rainy morning.

Since Jim leaves immediately after breakfast with the mail I will cut short my meanderings. When do you get back to New

York? Next week, I suppose — at latest. Surely then we may hope to see you.

As ever, affectionately yours,

SAMUEL WINTERS.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

September 28th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

ALMOST as much, indeed, as you do, I find myself wondering if this mood of rustic contentment will prove transitory, and — even as all other fulfilled desires — breed its own reaction. Shall I presently, when winter winds, sweeping down from the four corners of the heavens upon my bit of mountain, pile snowdrifts waist deep around my door, find myself longing for my bachelor quarters in town, the street-car banging along around the corner, the dust and noise, and the busy traffic that make up the life of the city square? I hardly think so — but we shall see. Certain it is that the long summer days have flown by upon golden wings. Several times Miranda thought to chide me, to spur me on to great endeavor, but although

we have talked over life and its purposes (she, shyly at first, but with ever broadening frankness and fearlessness, as she comes to know me better), it has not blinded her to the corollary that I would rather talk than work.

In the meantime I have been "learning" Miranda — "studying" would express a degree of intention that has never existed in my thoughts thus far. I have merely chosen to keep my soul receptive and my mind empty (in the last I have succeeded admirably), that Miranda, when she chose, might fill me with herself; and at the present writing, though I be accused of levity, I should say that so generously overflowing with Miranda am I that were she to withdraw herself I should be a wilderness, more than ever like the deserted orchard we visited this afternoon.

It came about in this fashion: The old owner of the Hall had also quite a bit of land twelve miles back in the mountains. Being so far distant from a railroad — and indeed from habitation of any sort — he allowed it to be farmed after a fashion by some very poor backwoodsmen, exacting in place of rent toll on the orchard products, which were very fine. Years ago, before even my recollection,

the farmhouse burned down one cold winter's night. It must have been a terrible experience for those poor people, helpless before the element they had no means to fight. I never heard just what became of them, but the place was not rebuilt. It was too inaccessible, absolutely cut off from all communication during the long snowy season.

When I purchased the Hall I was strongly urged to take also this fifty acres at, it is true, a ridiculously small sum for so much of God's good earth. I allowed myself to be persuaded, the agent representing that it was an excellent site for a hunting and fishing club, and that he had already been approached by several would-be purchasers who would gladly consider it if it could be acquired apart from the Hall. I commissioned him to find a buyer at anything like a reasonable figure, but I notice that his enthusiasm has strangely abated now that the long unsold estate is at last off his hands.

Remembering the fame of the orchard and acting upon Jim's assurance that the apple crop would be a very fine one this year, I decided to take Miranda with me and estimate the prospects and the advisability of

sending a team after my apples, which, from a partiality to the fruit of my boyhood, I hated to think of as rotting on the ground. The weather being hot we put off the expedition from day to day, but at last came the first tang of autumn, tripping in its impatience upon the skirts of summer, and having disposed of a hasty luncheon, Miranda and I started for — well, strangely enough, the old place has absolutely no name, being apparently unknown to the younger generation, and still designated by those of the older yet alive as "back to Beeman's" — Beeman being the name of the family who lived in it, more than thirty years ago.

So back we went; back indeed! If I wanted to I might easily write a paragraph full to overflowing of symbolic touches; but that, alas! I am no Maeterlinck.

Enough if I say that after the first six miles we turned off the turnpike road and bumped and rattled along the lumber trail that runs straight — or rather crookedly — back into the heart of the forest. And such a road! For the greater part of it so narrow that we touched the trees on either side — though here and there wide enough for two teams to pass;

always either up hill or down — and for the most part up, with deep ruts that clutched the wheels and refused to let them go.

As for Joan, she went picking her way among the rough, loose stones, very careful of her feet (poor dear!) and utterly regardless of the boulders over which she precariously tilted our buggy wheels. Indeed she looked back at us now and then — when of her own accord she paused for breath, or pretended with much equine histrionicism that she could not possibly take another hill — with a mild reproof in her big soft eyes, as though to say: "Where on earth are you two imbeciles going? Is this a decent road for a poor horse to travel?"

Once we startled a copper head, coiled asleep in a nice, round mat alongside the road. I can't think where Joan's instincts were — perhaps she was too intent on the long, hard stretch ahead of her. We would not have seen it had it not raised a sudden inquisitive head, and then, with almost leisurely unconcern, undulated its way through the bushes abreast of us. Miranda in all her tramps had never encountered one before, and even when I was a boy copperheads were nearly extinct

in the country round, although occasionally a few were brought in by the lumbermen who sold their dried skins to summer visitors. Ugh! I'm glad Miranda has no such unpleasant fancies. I may be foolish, but I can not imagine living comfortably with a woman who wore a dead snake around her waist; though, inconsistently enough, I have no such objection to a bit of seal or alligator.

Once we passed a lumber wagon drawn up close to the side of the road, its patient mules eyeing us — or so we fancied — with a faint surprise and interest; and we heard in the distance the rhythmic sound of axes. We counted on that hillside seven marked trees, chalked with an ugly cross, and Miranda prayed that it might rain that night and obliterate the mark on one splendid hickory, at least. But for the last five miles we came across no sign of human habitation, and then the woods began to grow thinner and we dipped down into a little hollow — the road suddenly meandered into an ancient meadow and lost itself in a vague indication of what had once been a grassy lane. Here we tethered Joan, and together crossed the meadow to the decrepit stone wall that

marked its furthermost boundary. If there is anything more suggestive of the disintegrating effects of age than an old stone wall fallen together into a shapeless mass of niggerheads — I do not know it. Beyond the wall was a half-acre of ground overgrown with weeds, the site of what had once been the homestead. Of the barns and outbuildings there was of course no trace, but the foundations of the farmhouse were still standing — the stones fire-blackened and weather-worn. Beyond was a wilderness where at one time had flourished a vegetable garden, and crossing this we found ourselves on the gentle southern slope which had once borne the famous orchard. I think I mentioned that the afternoon had been full of symbolism: that deserted orchard was a sermon! The trees were there to be sure, but of all those splendid apples that had once been noted for their size and flavor there was no suggestion. The fruit had retrograded till the knotty, worm-eaten, tough and tasteless things were scarcely fit for pigs. It was, of course, too soon to judge severely of the winter apples, but among the early varieties we found only one tree that did not disgrace its name. There had

been no careful gardener there to graft or prune, and although Miranda, eagerly examining the bark, began talking scientifically of some parasitic scale, I knew better.

"Don't, Miranda!" I pleaded, taking her hand away from the branch she was already examining with all the professional interest of the trained horticulturist. "Don't make it any worse; it's moral is sufficiently terrible —without the San José scale."

"Why — what is it?" asked Miranda, instantly transferring her sympathy from the trees to me. "Do you feel so sorry for them?"

"It is my heart, Miranda. My own heart is like this orchard; for it has no gardener either—to tend the trees, to prune, to nourish, or to gather in the fruit."

"Oh, see there!" she cried. "Did you see them? Bluebirds at this time of year — and I never saw so many together before. Oh, *isn't* it wonderful?"

And it did indeed seem wonderful. For with us, bluebirds rarely linger more than a few days in passing. Occasionally a pair will nest near us, and the orchard will be made glad with their tender, elusive song and wavering flights; but like Miranda, I'm sure I had

never seen half a dozen of them together before. These were down at the foot of the orchard among some plum trees, and the silent flash of their blue wings — that wonderful blue which is like nothing else that I can think of — kept us entranced, until a sound borne on the still mountain air made us look at each other with amazement. Finally Miranda laughed.

"Well," she said, "I'm no logician, but a cow-bell usually means a cow; and a cow would mean that we are not so far from a house as I had imagined."

I helped Miranda over the wall and we ran down the hill to where a little ravine sheltered the tiny brook — which we crossed, and up the other sloping side, and so came out upon a straggly road. Down it, driving two cows before him, came a freckle-faced, bare-legged boy who might have been the ghost of myself — till he opened his mouth. He told us rather sullenly — as though he resented questioning — that he lived "a half-mile over." He had been pasturing his cows on my land, but much I cared; and when I told him to tell his father that he would do me a favor if he would send over and gather as many of the

apples as were fit to use, he thanked me rather sheepishly, so that I imagine they had never before felt the need of getting permission.

"Fancy —" said Miranda, as more soberly we made our way back to the now thoroughly disgusted Joan — "what it would mean to live in a little four-room bit of a house — with perhaps five or six children — in an out of the way corner of the world like this. I'd rather have the Hall — wouldn't you?"

"Would you, Miranda?" I cried eagerly. "I'd like to give you the Hall — and the garden — and the fern-nest — and the woods — and the old cow-pond you're so anxious to make a water-garden of, and the books, and of course you — you wouldn't mind if I threw *myself* in for good measure?"

Miranda looked at me with as much displeasure as I had ever seen on her sweet, grave face.

"Don't jest!" she said. Then rapping the reins over Joan's indignant back, she added crisply: "Come Joan, old girl, you must hurry up."

"But I'm not jesting!" I protested. "And don't hurry Joan; I shouldn't care if we never got home."

I hoped Miranda would look at me again, but she didn't. Instead she made a very palpable attempt at changing the conversation by addressing sundry sympathetic remarks to Joan.

"But — " said I — "it will do her good. She ought to be brought up here every day for exercise; she's growing too fat and lazy entirely."

That won me what I sought — a second quick glance from Miranda.

"Of course, you know," I said, "Joan goes in with the rest of the live-stock; so I'd like her to be in good condition."

"*Oh!*" cried Miranda, her cheeks burning. "That is unbearable; it's not like you. How can you make a jest of such things?"

"Sweetheart! Sweetheart!" I cried. "What else dare a man do but jest when he's fairly crazed with fear?"

"Fear?" said Miranda, "of what?"

"Of you!" I whispered, so low that she looked at me quickly to make sure she had heard aright.

"Why — " she faltered — "why should you fear me?"

"Tell me how else a man should feel when he sees before him the culmination of all his

hopes and ambitions, the desire of his life, the realization of his dreams — and knows he is not worthy to attain them?"

"Why are you not worthy?"

"Were any man?"

"That is temporizing — "

"You are so *young*."

A faint smile flickered momentarily over Miranda's face.

"In the language of someone whose name I have forgotten — 'That is a defect that time will remedy.' "

"And you are so rare a being, Miranda."

"Are you exalting me to depreciate yourself by implication?"

"Partly — perhaps; how else should we select the baser metals than by comparison with gold?"

For a long time Miranda did not answer. When she spoke it was as though she thought aloud.

"I do not know how love would make a man feel; I should imagine it would make a woman very proud. Why should it not? After all, it is the chrism — life's consecrated oil — that sets her apart — "

"Would it be such to you, Miranda?"

She sent me a quick, beseeching glance; then rallied bravely.

"Joan is taking advantage of us; if we persist in so serious a topic she will never get home."

"Bother Joan!" said I.

It was quite dark when we drove into the barn and turned the tired Joan over to Jim. We knew Miranda's mother would have supper ready for us, yet we lingered a moment, as by mutual consent, at the side of the house where the rose mallows, pink and white, are banked and the asters edge the walk.

"I am thinking," I said softly, "of that poor deserted orchard. No, of my heart, I mean. All the big brave hopes, the high ideals, the generous instincts, the honest ambitions, retrograding and degenerating into mean little snarly actualities — because there is no careful gardener to prune and nourish, to watch the ripening fruits and gather them. Won't you be the gardener, Miranda?"

Miranda's answer was inarticulate, but she left off caressing the sleepy asters and found her way, somehow, into my arms. Presently she whispered, with her head upon my heart: "Poor old orchard!" and then, triumphantly,

raising eyes that matched the stars: "But it *wasn't* deserted! You've forgotten the bluebirds."

Ah, Mathilde! I am too happy to write more! Miranda has promised to marry me! Not a thousand years from now — but soon, very soon. Her face was divinely tender as she said: "After all, why should I make you wait? What have I to get ready? All my life has been but a getting-ready for you; and you, you have waited so long for your life's fulfillment."

Ah, Mathilde! Not even to you can I tell what I answered. Bless us, Mathilde, for without your benediction even this one blissful moment would be incomplete.

Affectionately yours,

SAMUEL WINTERS.

PART IV

THE NIGHT GARDEN

[*A letter from Miranda Rowen to Dorothy Roscome*]

October 1st, 19—

Dearest Dorothy:

I HAVE lived in such a dream these last three days that I hardly know how to marshal anything so matter-of-fact as words into order sufficiently intelligible to carry my news to you. Dear girl, it must all sound so very abrupt, I fear, and yet—What is the use? You've guessed it already, haven't you? And you won't suggest that I'm "too rash, too sudden, too ill-advised" when I tell you that we are to be married very soon — the end of this month in fact.

It is just five months to-day since I met Mr. Winters, and yet — let me whisper it to you, Dorothy: Five months is quite a while to get used to an idea, especially if every hour of the day the thought, tenderly persuasive and omnipresent, laps you around with its unobtrusive suggestion. I admit to myself now

that at the very moment when I stepped before the great dogwoods that spread pink and white snowstorms on the grass beneath them, and found a stranger down on his knees among the violets, I knew that he had come into my life to stay — that he cupped my soul in the hollow of his hand as surely as he held the solitary flower he had plucked, and I'm very certain my face must have gone as white as the violets; so frightened and so awed was I.

So, after all, it is not sudden. On the contrary, Mr. Winters says that it has taken me an unpardonably long time to grow used to the idea — and wonders slyly if it will take me as long to learn to drop the formal "Mr. Winters." I shall write you at greater length in a day or two — this is only to say that we want you. Mr. Winters is writing to ask Mrs. Bursey, for we have decided that of all the world we each need to complete our happiness but one friend. You will come, won't you? We haven't fixed the date, but it will be the last week in October — the thirtieth, most likely.

Congratulate me, dear; I am so very happy. And yet so quiet with it all, so much at peace

that I sometimes wonder if I am really quite awake. Mother is very glad for me, very confident of my future, but I think she mourns the lack of ante-nuptial excitement. She would like to see me — just for once — exercised over my clothes, forgetting that I can hardly care greatly for such matters, being her child as well as father's. Dear Mother! Ever since I can remember I have simply had to force her to get herself the necessities of life, yet I think it would give her a real thrill of delight if I would go out sometime and buy myself half a dozen pairs of silk stockings — or something equally frivolous. Perhaps I shall, just to please her, some day; but at present I'm too deeply joyous to care very much whether I'm married in cheese cloth or peau de soie — so long as I'm not called upon to sew the tedious thing myself.

I shall feel a certain trepidation till I get your letter. If you were not such a dear I should expect from you a dubious lecture for my *empressement*, and, *dear* that you are, you can scarcely be expected to realize — never having seen the gentleman — that Mr. Winters is a person I have known for centuries.

But you, too, will understand some day, so be merciful.

Lovingly,

MIRANDA.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to Miranda Rowen*]

Thursday Night.

Dear Love:

I AM catching the early morning train to New York, so will be slipping out of the house before you are well awake. I have only just made up my mind to go, and the decision having been reached I must act upon it at once or I will weaken. For it is not easy to leave you, Miranda, even for a few brief days. Brief did I say? when each hour that I am away my soul clamors for you with an intensity that strangles all else, with a love that is savage at the edges — but that within holds ever a core of perfect peace, secure content, and deep, still joy. Ah, Miranda! I shall never write you a love letter. I shall spend my life too closely at your feet.

Your light has been out hours ago. Dear child! I wonder if you are sleeping. Some-

how, I fancy not. Dear little girl — wide-eyed in the dark — I read the trouble in your voice, the doubt in your sweet eyes. You may sleep, my darling. Your problem will have solved itself long ere I return. At least, so prays your lover.

S. G. W.

* * *

[*A letter from Miranda Rowen to her dead father*]

Sunday Night.

SOMEHOW I have always felt that if I needed you very much, dear father, you would come to me, you would give me a sign — if only in my dreams. You used to say that writing a thing all out — even if it was very much involved in one's mind — would clear up the puzzling places much more satisfactorily than aeons of purposeless and profitless rumination. Darling, I know why Garth went away. I feel that I can guess why he's staying away. He sent me a line yesterday saying he was detained and mentioning his address. Mother expected him this afternoon and was quite vexed with me for being

so phlegmatic, but although my heart beat suffocatingly as it neared train time, I felt that intuition — having served him in his going — would not fail him in his return. For dear, dear father, I know that Garth read my anxious questionings aright. A word, a look, a touch, a kiss from him that somehow were different, and I — who love him so well —drew back aghast at the sea of passion I had not suspected. I have loved him so quietly, so — so tamely, it seems now, and perhaps it is not a quiet love like mine that he needs. We have taken each other so much for granted that for the first time — *to-night!* — I have asked myself if, after all, I really know what I am doing. Always he has been so calm, so tender, so self-restrained, that I did not know him in a new guise, and I have an uncomfortable suspicion that he let me get this glimpse of Garth, the lover, not because — as he repentingly pretended — he was carried out of himself, but to wake me to the fact that with just such a Garth I should have to live. There was something splendid — primitive — savage even (it is his own word) about it, and oh, the bitterness of the thought! I was not at all attuned to such a mood — was not prepared,

did not respond, was plainly frightened even. And so poor Garth has gone off by himself, doubting if I really love him, wondering if perhaps I have not mistaken my own heart, and waiting patiently for me to find myself out. By the acuteness of my own distress I gauge his misery. At the same time, way down in a little corner of my extremely nonsensical soul, I feel quite sure that we are both suffering needlessly; since no matter how we differed, no matter what ages and weary voids separated us each from the other, I should have to come to him in the end. Ah, but I had dreamt of a flawless oneness in which there would be no need of concessions and compromises — hateful words, for all their tactfulness, that yet hide ugly skeletons of discord beneath their graceful diplomacy.

I suppose that mother would say all that ails me is the weather. Mother is a great believer in the moral effects of atmospheric conditions, you know, and certainly this is odd weather for October. The day began with a cold, gray dawn, a driving rain storm, high winds that sent "the flying gold of the maples" broadcast. Then the sun came out and beamed moistly on a steaming earth;

and now the night puts a whimsical end to the unrestful day.

It is a night full of mystery; there is portent in the wind tossing the tree-tops, in the moon — not yet full grown — riding breezily among the scurrying clouds, in the unquiet air, so warm, so moist, so full of electricity. The lightning is everywhere at once, not in flashes, nor yet in sheets; the whole atmosphere palpitates for a moment like a luminous fog between you and the objects that stand out clearly enough under the light sky, then quivers an instant and is gone. It is weird, uncanny, and fills one with a creeping sense of dread which the warm breeze fans to terror; altogether a most unpromising night in spite of its beauty. I do not think that I harbor many fears; the woods, these mountain roads, are my friends in any guise of storm or sunshine, yet to say that there is nothing in natural phenomena to terrify seems very absurd to me. All nature is too near akin to the Great Mystery, too much a part of the infinite *raison d'etre* to be ever considered commonplace. It would be like boasting that one was unafraid of God! Yet the fear is not unwholesome. It sets one searching—

searching out the weak places, the shams, the trivialities.

So perhaps it is to the magical night of unrest, of little panting portents, that I am to attribute the strangely insistent feeling that somewhere down there in the garden you are waiting for me, dear. I have never before felt it so strongly — never at all, in fact, except in June — your month. Are you there, dear? pacing the lilac walk or hovering uncertainly among the dogwoods? I have always felt sure that if you did come to me, it would be when the flowering dogwoods spread their snowy panoplies above the early violets; but now their leaves are scarlet and gold, with vivid red berries borne proudly aloft — till the first deep snow shall drive the hungry birds to bolt the hostile fare. Ever and again from among the rugged, jutting clouds sails out the moon triumphantly. Every shrub throws its shadow across the path. Strange! I could swear that there was something moving down there — something that ——

All the house is dark; even mother, who keeps late hours these nights, has long since ceased fretting as to whether a tucked chemisette or a shirred one would be most becom-

ing. My light is out, too, for I love to write in the semi-darkness. It's so irrevocable — the words slip from my pencil into long lines of thought that I cannot read. So I feel almost as though they had gone to you, as though your spirit leaning over me could read what I cannot see, and Daddy! —— I must go! —— I must know what is waiting for me down there near the gate. Be with me! Give me a sign that all is well; that you approve — that you are satisfied with me.

Dear darling, it is quite two o'clock in the morning. I have just satisfied myself of that by the little silver watch you gave me on my tenth birthday. And this that I write you is in the nature of a thank-offering — and because I must write, must tell myself again it all is true, before I sleep. Dear, I went to the tryst — but you were not there. Instead — oh dear, dead father, I was wrong. I believe that you were with me all the time, urging me to be brave, to dare to see for myself, to be unafraid of aught that God might reveal. I slipped out of the old house as lightly as a ghost. The wind caught the dead leaves and sent them swirling with little sighs and moans around my feet. The late

asters and chrysanthemums rubbed their sleepy heads together with little ghostly murmurs, the wind seemed to redouble its moist fury — and the moon went out as completely as though she had been blown out for good. But although the individual shrubs and trees retreated into a serried mass at once, there was still light enough to find one's way about the garden — even if the frequent lightning had not flooded every corner of it. I had gotten down almost to the gate when in a sheet of light I made out the dogwoods and someone, I was positive, walking among them. Tall, broad shouldered, yet a trifle stooped, the figure seemed. I do not know what I expected; I know that I turned and ran across the strip of lawn; that in the shadow of the shrubbery I felt my way between the trees and bushes; that panting, sobbing, murmuring things only half-articulate, I ran directly into the arms of Garth — Garth who had turned sharply towards me as he heard my voice.

Oh, how close he held me! How warm and real his arms were! I did not know that I was crying till I felt his kisses mingling with the tears.

"Miranda! Dear, dear child! how did you come here?" And then, as I could not answer, he continued remorsefully: "I should not have lingered outside; I never dreamt that I might be seen. Were you frightened?"

"No —" I shook my head — "exalted!"

I felt his arms about me tighten, knew him studying my answer. Then, very softly: "You did not know I was here?"

"No — I don't understand now how you came here."

"Missed connections at the junction— came on by the 10:30, which was late, of course. They accommodated me by stopping. I've been here since midnight watching the storm gather. Besides, I had your window to guard, and you to think of. But you?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew then, dear darling, that I was glad you had not returned to me as I had wished. I could not have borne it; to believe you — in the dear form of old, hovering ever just beyond the veil of human sight would, I think, have broken something within me. How good it is that God does not always answer our prayers. Garth waited till I could speak connectedly,

soothing me with tenderness. After I had told him all, I felt his hand in mine tremble a little.

"Dear, brave, lonely, little child — " he whispered, "I wish I could think that your loneliness was over."

"Think it then — " I answered. And when he hesitated, continued earnestly: "It *is* over, Garth. How could I ever be lonely again, when I have you?"

I felt him smile.

"Then your doubts?"

"I have no doubts."

"Yet a few moments ago when you prayed your father for a sign?"

It dawned on me with a great gladness then that I had received the sign. I had sought my father — I had found my lover! I think I had found something else — the woman I was to be! but I could not tell him that.

"Dear heart," he whispered, "pacing here so close to you — yet so far that I could easily imagine what it might be to lose you — I had made up my mind never to frighten you again."

"You never can again," I said; "so your heroism is quite superfluous."

"Not even if I'm savage? It's only the edges — " he entreated.

"Not even if you're savage," I assured him bravely. "Would you know why?"

He nodded.

"Then, dear sir," I said, "in that first moment in your arms I awoke to a new certainty. It is this: While *my* love is very quiet — *at the edges*, a sort of dreamy, poppy-eyed content, there is something savage for you at the core. It's just a new-born savage — I caught only a breathless peep at him myself, but he's very lusty for an infant, and — and I shouldn't wonder — if he would grow." And with that I kissed him straight upon the lips and fled.

Oh, but he caught up with me by the moon-dial, and though we had no need for explanations they were very sweet to hear.

The storm has blown off to the south after all, and the moon-lit garden is quieter now. From the friendly porch, as we said our late good-nights, it seemed anything but the weird and ghostly place it had been an hour earlier; for with Garth's arm around me, I had no longer any doubt that I was home.

PART V

THE HEARTH

[*A letter from Mrs. Samuel G. Winters to her friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

November 5th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

AFTER all, I am glad you gave me permission to call you so. I may have stammered rather ungracefully that first night, but believe me, my heart has always called you by that dear name. For weren't you Garth's "Mathilde"? I only wish that my French wasn't so rusty that I might correspond with you in that beloved tongue. Then indeed, you might be *chere Mathilde*, and there is something about *chere Mathilde* that just suits you, even as the frame suits the lovely minature you gave Garth. By the way, isn't it a funny thing about names? Did Garth ever tell you how he hit upon mine without really knowing it? Now "Samuel" doesn't seem to suit him at all. He teases me dreadfully about it, but he has never yet heard me call him by his

first name — though, in confidence, Mathilde, I may tell you that I sometimes practice it softly in the dark. When I first met him I used to wonder if ever I would know him well enough to call him Samuel (Sam seemed quite too dreadful), and you can't imagine how relieved I was when I found out that all the country people about here who remembered him as a boy called him Garth. It was his mother's maiden name you know, and the Garths were among the first settlers of the county; so that when he was a tiny freckle-faced boy — the image of his mother's people — the old folks always referred to him as "one of the Garths, her's as married that young Winters, y' know." So Garth he will remain for me — even though you shamed me by your gracious, sweet-voiced "Samuel."

How good you were to us! Mother is quite as bad as we are — you have become the subject of a three-cornered eulogy. Mother, you know, in spite of having lived thirty years with the most unconventional of men, retains a certain love for things seemly — and usual. So our short engagement and our determination to be married quietly and without any fuss seemed — how shall I say?—

sort of unfestive and not sufficiently era-marking. She would willingly have slaved for weeks ahead of time to make the occasion a noteworthy one for Garth's friends. But after you came she grew quite suddenly satisfied, admitting confidently to me that you were a host in yourself. As for me, with you and Dorothy there, I felt that the rest of the world was well forgot.

We are settling into the winter season early. I am not sorry. There is something gloomy about that interval between the last leaf's fall and the first snowflake. All day the wind, tossing dead leaves about the denuded garden, has made me think of the ocean. Occasionally, it happens so; the air blows straight across the mountains and valleys from the northeast and brings to us, all these many miles away, a breath of the sea. With it comes a strange restlessness born of breaking waves and well-remembered stretches of white sand. Then — for several hours, perhaps, or a day or two at most — I am absent in spirit from this dear spot where I have been so happy; happier, since I have come to know it as Garth's home — and mine — than I had ever thought it possible to be.

Don't you love a log fire? Of course you do, or you would not be "Mathilde." On great occasions — as a sort of a sacrament — we burn birch in our fire-place; and really of late I fear the occasions are growing too frequent for our supply. We have lots of gray birch on the hillside, but the white is scarce, and both are so beautifully decorative we cannot bear to make of them a sacrificial offering — even to our hearth. Most of our fire-wood comes from a strip of woodland back in the mountains which Garth is having thinned out scientifically, and although it is rich in red spruce and pine, there is but little birch. The dead pine and cedar make a glorious fire, full of vim and vigor, with lots of snap and little crackling forest noises and lavish display of sparks; and when to such is added a huge oak log, or great blocks of maple, we can be sure of fire on our hearth all night — in the dead of winter — with nothing to show for it in the morning but a little heap of fine white ash, so perfect — Garth says — is the combustion. The other day he came back from a tramp up the mountain with a beatific expression and an armful of dried sumac branches. Such a white blaze

as the satiny yellow-green wood made, and such a fusilade of noise. Garth, like the vandal he was, stood and chortled with glee. The Major, it seemed, aware of the commercial possibilities of sumac, had never permitted a stick of it, no matter how crooked, to be burnt.

You would love Garth's expression when he rises to tend the fire; there is the radiance and worship and wonder of possession, and a dozen times of an evening he will bend solicitously over it, weighing with almost maternal anxiety our chances for seeing the backlog fall into a glowing ruin as the grandfather's clock in the hall chimes ten. For we gauge our logs by the exigencies of our own private ritual, which requires that Garth shall lay the fire (I lacking both the nice sense of adjustment and the necessary strength to handle the Major's ancestral tongs); that together we shall light it, extracting all the comfortable forest music that has lain so long silent; and that when at last the fire eats deep into the wood, lovingly, caressingly, Garth and I shall sit for a while in happy, contented silence, worshiping at the altar of our home.

But to-night the fire lacks its usual allure; it serves only to make me more restless. I am not exactly unaware of the cause; it's the first snowstorm of the season, and when have I ever failed to welcome the oncoming mantle of winter from the crest of the wooded hill beyond the meadow? Father always humored my childish longing to get out in the snow, for he, too, loved the gale and the driving blizzards, as well as the splendid rages of our mountain thunderstorms. It was such joy to trudge beside him through the blinding, softly falling flurry, past the barn and the tightly closed chicken house, through the forlorn relics of what had been a thriving vegetable garden, across the little lane, over the bars — wave-crested with snow, through the pasture, taking careful observations of well-known distances in order to keep the spring and the drinking-hole to windward, and then struggle up through the sparsely wooded little hill that terminates in a gorgeous battle-ground for the four winds of heaven, where you may watch the swirl of the blizzard and be buffeted about to your heart's delight. You, dear lady, with your contented joy in all things sane and mild, would hardly

seek — of your own accord, I fancy — the buffets of the gale. But oh, how mellow and warm and comforting is the fire afterward!

Garth sends his very dear love. He will write in a day or two. For me, I am, as I shall always remain, your adoring,

MIRANDA.

* * *

[*A letter from Miranda Winters to her dead father*]

Dear Father:

AS you once laughingly remarked, I have not the plodding persistence necessary for the keeping of a journal, yet I find that this habit of writing to you in moments of stress or great joy, or of indecision, grows on me. It is like communing with one's own heart, yet there is something in the thought of you that keeps one free from the egoism that becomes the unconscious menace of the keeper of diaries.

I suppose that it is, perhaps, this transition from individual life to blending halves of a harmonious whole that has set one of the halves, at least, probing about in her own consciousness. The transition is so subtle

that sometimes I am stung into a sudden terror, reaching blindly after the lost entity that was Miranda Rowen — your daughter, dear. It's not that I desire her back, you know, I would not recall her if I could, yet the ghost of myself that was my girlhood haunts me at times — as, for instance, to-night — with a gentle sort of reproach that grows with the storm. For it is snowing outside, darling, and I hear your voice in the soft swish of the flakes against the library window. It started in at sunset — a mere smudge against a hard, gray sky. We seem so snugly shut in, the world so comfortably excluded. Martha is about, of course; in the kitchen, I imagine, setting her sponge for the morning's baking. We can hear her voice in energetic protest to Snooks, who is very apt at such times to become overly affectionate for an elderly feline Then, too, Jim's lantern just bobbed past the bay window, so that I know he has gone to say good-night to Joan and dear, patient-eyed Griselda, and her calf — now no longer a baby

As for mother, she is across the valley on an errand of mercy. A little child's first cry will pierce a mother's heart to-night. God

send her many happy years to hear its laughter . . . . The wind is rising.

I am back in my old corner — dedicated to the books and pictures you loved. Garth prefers an easy chair by the open fire. I wonder what he is reading. What concentration men have! I could never be as unaware of him as he appears to be of me . . . . Oh! I'm glad I wrote *appears*, for just then Garth looked up and caught my eyes upon him and smiled.

"I shall have to get more weather-stripping for those windows if you're going to sit away over there, Miranda. Why don't you come nearer the fire? Your chair looks so empty — not to mention my arms."

"What is your book?"

"*Rest Harrow*, and yours?"

I blushed a little — and thrust it back among the papers. Garth shook his head playfully.

"I should think you guilty of a naughty French novel if I did not know you better. I suppose it is nothing more dangerous than a flower catalogue."

Ordinarily I hate equivocation, but the opportunity was too good.

"It is — after a fashion," said I, smiling enigmatically at my order-list of baby caps and socks that were to go across the valley if all went well. "But I was not reading; I've been writing to Mathilde, scribbling a bit — and thinking."

"Wonderful Miranda!" he cried, "to be *able* to think. With you so near, I can only *feel*." He held out his arms to me with such a simple, longing gesture that I fled straight from my outer darkness into the warmth and security of them and the glow of the log fire.

And so we sat a while in silence, Garth's arm about my waist, his long legs stretched luxuriously towards the glow. And presently, when I stole a sidelong glance at him, I was aware that once more his thoughts coquetted deliciously around the maddening Sanchia and her poet lover. He felt my stirring, and instantly his attention came back to me, while his smile enveloped me like a blessing.

"Uncomfortable?" he asked solicitously.

"N — no — "

"Shall I stop reading, or read to you?"

"No, no," I said, "but would you mind if — can you get along without me for a while?"

"My dear child! what an unanswerable question! But run along, of course."

I felt his puzzled gaze upon me as I fled. If he did not ache to get out in the storm I could never bring myself to make the suggestion; but for me, your memory and the girl I used to be were waiting on the hill.

Martha looked a bit askance when I emerged from the old closet behind the kitchen stairs with the result of my rummaging, but I explained, with some incoherence, I imagine, that I had some things which required looking over, and fled with my armful of contraband to the deserted dining room. There, in the dark, laughing to myself in my excitement, I put them on; wool leggings, a pair of arctics, a short skirt, the warm old reefer of my school-girl days, a tam-o-shanter, with a long muffler to protect my forehead and tie tightly across my ears. The venerable golf gloves were still in my coat pocket; I drew them on, and I was ready.

I opened the hall door stealthily; it creaked a little, and a swirl of arctic air swept down the passageway and rattled the library door with tugging insistence. I drew back guiltily. I ought, of course, to tell Garth, though for

the life of me I could not see why I should drag him from a warm fire and a fascinating book, in pursuit of a lure he did not feel; and if he could be persuaded not to come, he would worry all the time I was out. I determined upon a concession; I would slip around the house and get Fidelity. She would be all the guard I needed, and quite beside herself at being so honored.

I closed the door carefully behind me. There was a joyous bark from somewhere on the lawn, and a wild scampering of canine feet; at the same time a figure detached itself from one of the porch pillars, a figure muffled and mantled into unfamiliarity — all but the dear voice.

"Well, are you ready?" it said.

"How on earth did you guess?" I stammered.

"My dear child! you are of a transparency that is *epatant;* do you know that in the hour and a half since supper you have worn a threadbare path from the fireside to the window?"

"Not more than five times — or six, at the most," I protested.

"And when your restless little body was still, your soul stood staring longingly out into the storm," he laughed.

"Why, then, didn't you invite me out?" I asked reproachfully.

"I wanted to see what you would do. You are an awful coward, Miranda."

"And I called you a fireside sluggard," I retaliated.

"Besides, I didn't think you could be so selfish — shutting me out of the night and the storm," he chided.

"Instead of into it, as you richly deserve."

I snuggled close to his comfortable shoulder and he peered at me rather anxiously.

"Are you sure you're warm enough? That coat — "

"Hot as toast! It ought to be — it's chinchilla."

"Goodness!" His hand traveled tenderly down the length of my arm. "Isn't that very extravagant?"

"The cloth, goosie! not the fur. One of my school-girl relics that will not wear out; impossible in the daylight but consecrated to such times as this." After a moment, something constrained me to add: "Father bought it for me, years ago," and I felt the brooding tenderness with which Garth always surrounds me when I talk or think of you.

When once we had stepped out from the comforting light of the library windows, we could scarcely see each other three feet apart. Between the darkness and the snow, which fell in great, silent flakes that mantled us as in a fog, we were not nearly as well off as Fidelity, who, no matter how widely she capered, could always find her way back. So, as a concession to the elements, we stopped at the barn and got a lantern.

The snow had not been falling long enough to make heavy walking, although it was astonishing how deeply it had already piled up in the hollow places. The choke cherries and elder bushes that border the lane had their branches interlaced and weighted down by a cottony nightcap; while poor Fidelity was quite buried under a heavy avalanche when Garth let down one of the snow-crested bars to the meadow.

Strange how difficult we civilized beings find it to steer a straight course for anything. We were headed, as we supposed, for the little path that leads up the hillside, yet we brought up, instead, among the birches that grace the slope some twenty yards to the right; the "Pleiades," Garth calls them.

Fidelity was already darting through the sumac and hazel bushes, scattering shovelfuls of snow on her fat, lazy back as she went. I think that Garth was for turning back, afraid that I might stumble on some gnarled root and sprain an ankle, or otherwise come to grief, but while he was debating whether or not to call a halt, Fidelity and I had emerged from the tangle of bushes into which we had somewhat rashly plunged, and found ourselves on the edge of a bit of woodland, waiting for him and his lantern to catch up.

It was not nearly so cold after we passed the first hickories; although the timber is light it broke the wind, so that we scarcely felt its force at all; the ground was firmer and barely covered with a thin layer of snow, and the walking was not nearly so heavy as it had been in the meadow.

The air was so clean, so frosty, so life-giving, one could fairly taste the tang of the balsams in it. We stood still and drew it in — long, tingling breaths that sent the blood racing to our finger-tips. Then, very carefully, and depending wholly upon our lantern, for our ascent through the bushes had bewildered us, we began to pick our way

upwards, keeping a sharp lookout for the little patch of hemlocks — for through them ran our errant path. It wasn't really hard to find; Garth pretended that he had known where it was all along, but that he had wanted to see how much good my woodcraft would be in a snowstorm.

As we neared the top of the hill we began to catch the force of the wind again. When we came out suddenly from the shelter of the straggling fringe of trees upon the open ridge heads lowered to the gale, we found that the nature of the snow had changed while we had been under comparative cover. Little, hard, white spheres came tearing and tumbling down the wind like so many millions of sugar pellets that stung and cut our faces; they filled up the hollow places and slapped the angle of the ridge, spraying out from it into a blinding spoondrift at our feet.

I caught my breath and steadied myself, shoulder to shoulder with Garth. Far beneath us we knew the land rolled away in beautiful sweeping curves to the river, but we could see nothing but a dizzy blur as we gazed into the driving snow. Even the lantern's rays were powerless to pierce it, though

when we turned our backs to the wind, every tree and shrub was brought out sharply in the soft light.

When Garth finally broke the silence, it was by a commonplace:

"Are you cold?"

"No — but I suppose we'd better start back. The meadow will be pretty bad by now, it is piling up so."

Not a word did he say on the descent, except when I bumped against a sapling and was given a frozen shower-bath for my clumsiness. Once at the foot, we decided on the more sheltered — if longer — way home through the lane and around the front, rather than face the fury of the wind across the meadow again. We turned in at the carriage drive, where your splendid Weymouth pine, still proudly erect, spread its broad shoulders to the threatened burden, and up the path between the ghostly, hoop-skirted rose bushes, asleep 'neath their snug straw petticoats.

Jim was found waiting for Fidelity and the lantern. Martha had gone to bed. Garth began talking enticingly of something warm and stimulating — mulled wine, accomplished with the aid of a poker drawn red-hot from

among the embers of our deserted fire — and meanwhile we stamped the snow from our feet and shook it from coats and caps, while the light from the open hall door — our door! — shone welcomingly upon us.

At the threshold Garth stopped me.

"Have you had enough? Are you quite satisfied, little gypsy?"

"Quite — and thank you." I felt shy as a child. "You'll forgive me for running away?"

"Always! if you will take me with you."

"I did not know; I was afraid you would not care to come."

"Am I so old?"

"No — no."

"So sensible?"

"You are divinely foolish," I murmured, my face against his coat sleeve.

"Then do not run away again, dear heart. I cannot bear to let you go through any experiences alone."

"You might have to — sometime!"

The silence tingled between us. Then:

"*Miranda!*" Against the ruddy lamplight his face shone white, and I knew he thought of the woman in the valley.

"God made women so," I said, my voice trembling a bit, though I tried to keep it steady.

Oh, the silence! the rush and whirl of the falling snow! the infinite mystery of the commonplace life we live!

The warmth of the hall, stinging lips and cheeks a-tingle with healthy blood; the mystery of our presence here—who were not here yesterday, and must needs be gone to-morrow, that others may wonder and theorize as we did!

Something hummed in my ears; it was Garth's voice, vibrating, tender. But he had to speak twice before I heard him rightly.

Dear, dead father, the great "why" of life grows clearer. Sometimes I catch faint echoes of the answer — and always, always, it is in the voice of a little child.

PART VI

YE DARKLYNGE WODE

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

June 12th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

HOW provoking that, after all, I had to leave New York without saying good-bye. As you know, I had an appointment with Merrick in the afternoon, but as he was to have the contracts in readiness I did not anticipate being more than an hour at most; instead of which it was nearly five o'clock before I got away. They had arranged that Kaufman — the young man who is to make the illustrations — should be there. He's an ingenuous young fellow, as yet utterly unspoiled. This is his first big commission, and he's engagingly anxious to make good. I was glad to meet him and give him what suggestions I could; thus the afternoon was gone before I knew it.

So you were glad that I had justified your opinion of me? How could a man do other-

wise, with two such women as you and Miranda looking into his eyes and swearing that he was no idle parasite and must eventually take up his work where he had laid it down? Miranda suggested the theme, knowing intuitively it must possess me and drive me back to my desk again. I am more than grateful to her for it, for without some such work to anchor my imaginings upon, they would do me havoc, I fear, in the months that are before me. Ah Mathilde, how shall I tell you what has befallen your friend? how shall I make you share in the mystery that has crowned me richest among men? I run to you as to a mother, for have you not indeed mothered all that was best in my soul since first I met you?

Always, Mathilde, I have loved the woods at night; always, then, the forest-world seemed to hold some special message for me; but that life's consummation should be wrought so sweetly, so simply, so absolutely in sacred harmony with God's great plan, has stirred in me a mood of grateful wonder in which the rest of my days shall be spent.

As once before I had come back to the little village that had given me birth at sunrise,

so yesterday I came at sunset, and started to walk home up the mountain, choosing — instead of the longer way by the high-road — to cut through the woods, a road Miranda and I always take from the station. I had had the full glory of the setting sun through the car windows. So poignant its beauty — like quick ascending thirds upon a violin that seem unbearably sweet — that I loitered along the road in the afterglow, prolonging the home-coming till I should grow calm. I thought of the house waiting for me — all the doors set open to welcome the evening freshness; the scared gathering twilight bathing with mystery familiar corners; the fragrance of the mountain-laurel which Miranda would have brought in bodily from the woods; and on the porch — or somewhere out in the garden — Miranda, the marvelous!

At the thought I quickened my pace. I shook the riotous evening scents from my nostrils, blinked away the memory of pines and jutting outlined hill a-drip with sunset, and in time to the duet of a pair of hoarse-voiced tree-toads, and the answering chorus of the crickets, growing bolder as the twilight faded, turned sharply off the high-road, leav-

ing the last iridescent shimmering light — a dust of mother-of-pearl, that floated, impalpable yet transfiguring, over all the familiar landscape — behind me.

But chancing upon a talkative neighbor I did not, after all, enter the woods till the stars peeped out one by one and the last sleepy little robin had said its drowsy good-night.

How sweet the air was! How intoxicatingly fragrant the woods are on a summer evening. Especially when the breeze, blowing fitfully, brings whiffs of Betram's haycocks and spicy puffs of mint from the upland pasture, to mingle with the oily redolence of the witch-hazel, a scent of sweet-fern like the flick of Miranda's handkerchief fresh from the basket where she keeps them, or fragrance from the elders by the lane. Even the weeds that border the high-road give out a pungent odor which at so great a distance is far from unpleasant.

I stumbled along slowly, my hands in my pockets, sniffing luxuriously as I went. Turning suddenly where the road begins to ascend between two great boulders that sentinel the path, I saw, some fifteen yards ahead of me,

a light that was too high for a glow-worm and too large for a lightning-bug, and much too steady in its advance for a will-o'-the-wisp; and all my soul cried out — "Miranda!" and wondered that I had not felt her coming before.

"What are you doing in 'ye darklynge wode,' dear gadabout?" I cried, content that it was she — though the lantern searched out my form and left hers unrevealed.

> Mine be ye howlets eies to-night,
> Ye sailynge moone my sonne,
> Ye glo-bugge for my lanterne brite,
> And humanite my gunne.

she quoted back, gayly enough. But her voice had an unearthly brilliancy that struck weirdly across the space between us, so that I was glad to have her in my arms — to know her very real and warm and mobile to my kisses.

"If you must come prowling about disturbing the sleeping wood," I chided jestingly, "at least you should be content with the glo-bugge's light; you should not come into the forest nursery with a lantern."

"It *is* incongruous, isn't it?" asked Miranda softly.

"Horribly!" I whispered. "Put it out."

"And yet no mother fears to wake her babes by peering too searchingly into their faces."

"How do you know?" I scoffed, taking the lantern from Miranda's unresisting hand. I held it aloft to study her face a single blessed moment before I should put out the light, and at something I saw there, forgot it entirely.

"Have you been well?" I asked with sudden brusque anxiety.

"Yes — quite well. It *is* a nursery, isn't it, Garth?"

"Have you missed me?"

"No," she fibbed unblushingly. "I've been much too busy. There! Did you say the woods were asleep?"

We broke into sudden laughter. From somewhere up above us — in the branches, no doubt, of the tree under which we stood — a fretful catbird reproachfully squawked that we would wake her babies. A white moth sailed majestically past, mildly interested in our lantern; the leaves pattered and rustled overhead, a thousand little insect noises spoke to our acutely-tuned perception.

"Do you catch it, the fragrance?" asked Miranda in an awed whisper.

"Which one? There are so many."

"The warm, loamy smell, the spiciness of wet tree-bark, the dank moldiness of lichens somewhere about, the earth smell! I know of nothing more intoxicating. I could get down on my knees and press my face to the ground — but that you miss it so, just as burying your nose in a rose is by no means the best way to get its sweetness."

"You have forgotten the smell of the mountain-laurel," I reproached playfully. I held the lantern up over my head, for the rhododendrons were above us on the hillside, growing thicker, with more rope-like, ancient roots towards the summit — where the rain washes away the earth from around its feet. The beautiful clusters of pink-white blooms always tempt me — in spite of the sticky fingers you get in plucking them.

"I'll get you those," I said, "though I suppose you have the house filled with them as usual."

"Not now," said Miranda softly, with face — I thought — averted from my gaze. "I have not brought a single branch into the house since you left."

"Why?" I exclaimed, studying Miranda's profile in genuine bewilderment. There was

something I had never seen there before; something alluring, mysterious, compelling. Her gray eyes, as she turned them on me, seemed fuller, more liquid; her brow more noble.

"Why?" I repeated. "I thought you loved the laurel so."

"Not half well enough," she protested. "But then I never understood before. Now that I do, I could not bear to bring a single branch into the house — to cheat it of its mission. Haven't you ever noticed how long they keep fresh indoors?"

"Isn't that most desirable?"

She hesitated. I confess that I did not follow her. My wood-lore was of the practical country-boy variety; Miranda has seen the world of growing things through the sensitive eyes of her father. Her face flushed adorably under my gaze, and she moved a little up the slope to the first clump of rhododendrons.

"Don't you understand?" she whispered shyly. "They keep longer in the house because they are waiting; waiting with hopeful hearts for a possible release. Oh, can't you see the pity of it?" She laughed; there was

a little hysterical ring in her voice. "The dear things! You will think me silly, perhaps. They are like sweet old ladies who keep their virginal hearts fresh and young for the lovers who never come."

"Why Miranda!" I cried; and again — "Why Miranda! *Sweetheart*!"

"Hush! Look there!" she whispered.

A tiny, narrow-winged moth was hovering over a flower. It was a fresh flower, newly opened; one could see that from its color, and also from the snug, taut way in which the anthers were tucked into their little cradle-like pouches. But even as Miranda spoke, the little visitor lighted softly on the blossom, and though you would have said so gentle a touch could never waken anything, the stamens bent over and above the sweet robber, caging him long enough to shower their gold upon him, so that when he finally emerged Miranda and I declared that he looked quite breathless and distraught.

She bent and brushed with her lips the rifled bloom.

"You sweet thing!" she whispered. "You sweet thing! To-morrow you will be quite old and withered, perhaps. But don't you

care — you will not have lived in vain." Then, her face all a-brim with tender trouble, her eyes swimming in happy tears, she turned and threw herself into my arms.

"Oh Garth! Garth!" she sobbed.

My heart stood still. A wave of flame shot downwards to my feet, Mathilde, then up to my heart, and stayed there. I no longer needed to ask what was the mysterious alchemy that had changed my violet to a rose. I had no need for words at all — nor had Miranda. Thus was life's accolade bestowed upon me; the chrism, night and silence.

Bless us, Mathilde. We are so wholly wrapt in wonder, we are like little children who for the first time see the stars.

Affectionately,

SAMUEL.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

October 5th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

HOW shall we thank you, Miranda and I? For me, I am lost in wonder before such marvels of needlework. Pray, Madam, is it a trousseau for a fairy? Miranda, at my side, is still harping on the stitches. Such tiny stitches she affirms, could never have been made by anyone but you. And though you so modestly remind us that your eyes grow old and that you can no longer do credit to the French sister who painstakingly taught you, we are disposed to doubt you. There was not in all that convent class your peer, Mathilde; and sweet fibber that you are, you know it.

Miranda, with many a dubious frown, has gone back to her own work. Poor child! I believe she is honestly distressed that she cannot live up to your standard, for just now she showed me a damp and mussed-up little yoke, and indicating yours, whispered: "You don't think *he'll* see the difference, do you?" And when I mumbled my assurance to the

roughened forefinger, she chid me gently for laughing at her dreams.

"Your *seams*, you mean," I teased. At which she pricked once more her unaccustomed fingers. For Miranda, while in all the essentials the most womanly creature alive, has always had a curious disdain of the purely feminine arts. She would rather plant cabbages than cook them; could easier weed a garden than sweep a room; prefers currying Joan to washing dishes. Such being the case, her voluntary announcement that she would leave to no other hands than hers the preparation of that wonderful wardrobe, filled me with a curious misgiving — a mere man's clumsy fear that herein was something from which he was to be excluded. It was wholly selfish, I admit; for so long as I knew her reading with me, writing with me, tramping miles at my side, or sitting silent before the fire at my knee, I was content to speak no word. I was secretly proud, too, of the manner in which I accomplished certain unusual tasks: the enameling of a pretty wicker basket Miranda had ordered, and the rigging up of certain ridiculous ruffles and curtains for it; the choice of a room for a

nursery, and the evolving of screens and shelves of enameled wood. But when Miranda retired behind a pile of snowy, billowy things, and proceeded to tease the patient goods with absurd tucks and puckers — her brow all furrowed up the while, and not a thought for me — I confess to a left-out-in-the-cold feeling, a suspicion that right here was where I became entirely superfluous. Miranda, looking up from a puzzling problem of lace or embroidery, pink ribbons or blue, saw me perched on the hearth-rug in something of the attitude of the traditional stork that was supposed to be hovering over my roof-tree. She broke into a low ripple of delicious laughter.

"You dear boy! If you don't go to work — instead of standing there glooming — I shall set you to sewing on buttons."

"Do you think I could?" I cried, eagerly enough — little dreaming what I was getting into. For I sewed them on, Mathilde — that is, as soon as I could get hold of the ridiculously tiny things, and educate my clumsy fingers to hold so fragile an implement as a needle fine enough to go through their absurd holes.

It took me an hour to sew on three buttons. Dear Lord! What patience women have. Miranda said — with demure lips and hidden eyes — that I had done very well. But since then I have been content to write away on the story that is to bring luxuries and wonderful electric toys for the boy. Miranda laughs when I tell her that. She says he will need no toys for the first year except his own little toes and fingers and the sun-birds on the floor and wall. Ah well! what matter? I pretend to myself that I must finish this novel before next Christmas, that he may have the most gorgeous tree and the most wonderful stocking that ever a baby boy possessed. And the pretense is an inspiring one; for oh, the joy of planning something to do for the tiny being that is to be mine as well as Miranda's.

I chafe at the thought that his father can do nothing — absolutely nothing — for him now. But later — ah, later we shall see! I am quite sure that I have never written anything worth writing before; I am equally certain that after the boy comes I shall write with a pen of fire.

Miranda joins me in sending her very dearest love. She would have me say that she

will write to-morrow, and that she wants to be remembered to all your dear ones. For me, I am always,

Your devoted friend,
SAMUEL GARTH WINTERS.

* * *

[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

December 11th, 19—

Dear Mathilde:

ONCE more we are "enclosed in a tumultuous privacy of storm," but this time no short-skirted gypsy braves the driving blizzard with me. Instead, dear child, how she sleeps! sleeps for the babe and herself (the boy, I had almost said, for somehow we are both very sure it will be a boy).

For two days now the blizzard has raged from the northeast. Jim has shoveled a path to the barns, but except for that the house is up to its knees in snow, all its fair proportions lost. The library windows, for instance, look exceedingly ridiculous, opening as they do directly on a new ground-level, the veranda steps are playing hide and seek, while no one would suspect the presence of a back porch,

for the snow, swept across the meadow by a driving wind, is much higher than the railings.

During the day the sun came out and chased deep indigo shadows across the lawn, and a brisk breeze swept the fine snow in playful scurries before it. "A soft, white baby-world, all done up in cotton-batting and swansdown capes," Miranda called it; and — little wretch! — I had much ado to keep her from sallying forth with broom and shovel. As it is, I suspect her of having snowballed Jim longer than was judicious — though she chided me for an old molly-coddle when I brought her in.

We watched a flamboyant red-rimmed sun sink behind the utmost pinkish-purple hill this afternoon. For a while a single copper-burnished light lingered; then vanished suddenly as though a puff of wind had put it out. The pines, a bit more purply black then the purplish mountains, the snow a little lighter gray than the sky; we shall revel — please God! —in these impressionistic studies all winter.

Your solicitude for Miranda is very dear to me, Mathilde. But you need have no fear for her. No blossom in her garden ever

matured more sweetly. I have found no trace of the whims and moods that our intensive civilization breeds in most women; only an added sweetness as the days go by. I have watched her closely — probing with anxious heart for a trace of that dread which would be but natural. One day I found her sitting in the sunset glow, her eyes on the purple hills beyond. Her face, in the hallowing light, was filled with awe, a wonder so profound, that I almost cried out. She heard the half-repressed exclamation and turned.

"I startled you," I murmured apologetically. "I did not know you were here."

"Oh, Garth, isn't it wonderful? I'm so bewilderingly happy — and so frightened."

"Frightened?" I had gathered her up in my arms in a moment. "Frightened of what? You must not think of that, beloved; you must not let — "

"Oh! You thought I meant of — death? Dear heart, I shall not die; I never think of that. I believe God must have promised me sometime in my sleep that He would not let me die; I feel so certain of it — so relieved from any doubt."

"Of what, then?"

"The mystery, dear; the maddening, elusive, unsolvable 'Whyness of the Why,' as Father used to call it. Sometimes the thought of it bears me to a Heaven in which I can scarce breathe for joy; at other times I am so frightened, so overawed, so crushed — bewildered — confused — that I want to cry aloud, to run out into the dark and hide in the woods — Oh! so Eve must have felt that first bewildered night outside of Eden."

I hushed her gently in my arms. I could sympathize because I could understand; only, I had breasted the perplexing sea of questions years ago, and landed safely on the other shore — with you to help me. That for most of us life goes on unconsciously, is no doubt fortunate. Weak brains unhinge when, for the first time, they catch a glimpse of inexorable law.

But Miranda is not weak — nor is she cowardly. Very soon she was laughing with me as we strove to outdo each other in descriptions of the very tangible reality that would soon be the balance-wheel for two erratic natures. Suddenly she shook her head.

"He won't help matters one little bit. He will be just such a wonderer as you and I,

and some day we will catch him pinching his rosy limbs black and blue to make very sure that he's wide awake."

"He will never be wide awake," I amended. "How could he be — in the Garden of Dreams?"

Miranda drew her straight brows into a becoming little line of maternal decisiveness that I am learning to watch for, as she answered:

"Then we will have to put him outside the Garden just long enough to wake him up. Oh yes, dear heart; don't shake your head and look reproaches. It is wrong — though very comfortable, I admit — to go through life in a gray haze."

"Even when it is rose-lined?"

"Even when it reflects the glories of a thousand sunsets. I am more truly awake than I ever was before, and even now — " she smiled shyly — "my days are poppy-seasoned." Then, with a little catch in her breath: "I shall welcome even pain that quickens me to life!"

What I answered does not matter. I am ashamed to say that I am the cowardly one, needing constant encouragement and support.

Oh, Mathilde — if — if I should lose her! Write to me, Mathilde, comfort me, encourage me. She is so divinely dear and sweet as the time approaches that the thought of what she must bear for me maddens me with self-reproach and fear. I cannot write more. I must pretend to be busy with some trifle in her service; must see that she sleeps comfortably, that the windows are as she likes them. If I might bear it for her! If I might bear it for her!

SAMUEL.

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[*A letter from Samuel Garth Winters to his friend, Mathilde Bursey*]

January 29th, 19—

YOU will want to know at once, Mathilde. Somewhere, far back in my consciousness is the thought. I hold on to it, as a child holds its mother's hand in the dark. I force myself to write that I may not entirely exhaust the patience of the household.

How garrulous that old clock is! It ticks above the stillness of the library with an inexorable rhythm that is maddening. There

is no wind stirring across the muffled valley, and within, no sound except the occasional light tread of the nurse.

The doctor has just been down. He is a dear old fellow, whom I remember as a boy. He offered to sit with me a while, but I could not stand his chatter — thinking of the flight of stairs and the long hall that separated him from Miranda.

Martha comes in from time to time to freshen the fire or to force on me some coffee; her hearty country manners have softened down to a quiet, unobtrusive sympathy. Miranda's mother does not leave her for a moment. What a selfish convention that permits man to screen himself from sight of pain in such an hour! Mothers of mankind! what have they not borne for us?

I thought I heard — Oh, do they think they can keep me out, with Miranda's soul crying out to mine through the darkness?

Morning.

There's a ghostly, reluctant dawn streaking the east behind the snow-swathed hills, Mathilde; but I read the promise of spring into everything, for a moment since, across the head of our little son, Miranda stretched out

a weak hand to me, and whispered adoringly:

"He's real! He doesn't vanish when I touch him, Garth!"

"Our little son!" I whispered back — my soul worshiping.

"All — our — dreams — come true!" she murmured reverently; and like a tired child, with sweetly drowsy eyes, floated off to fresh dreamlands filled with promise for the morrow.

So has been born to us, and to our Garden of Dreams, a little son. God keep his heart forever clean as now, that he may never cause his mother pain, that he may never be cast without the Garden and find himself groping blindly for the gate.

From our Garden we salute you, Mathilde! Bless us from yours!

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